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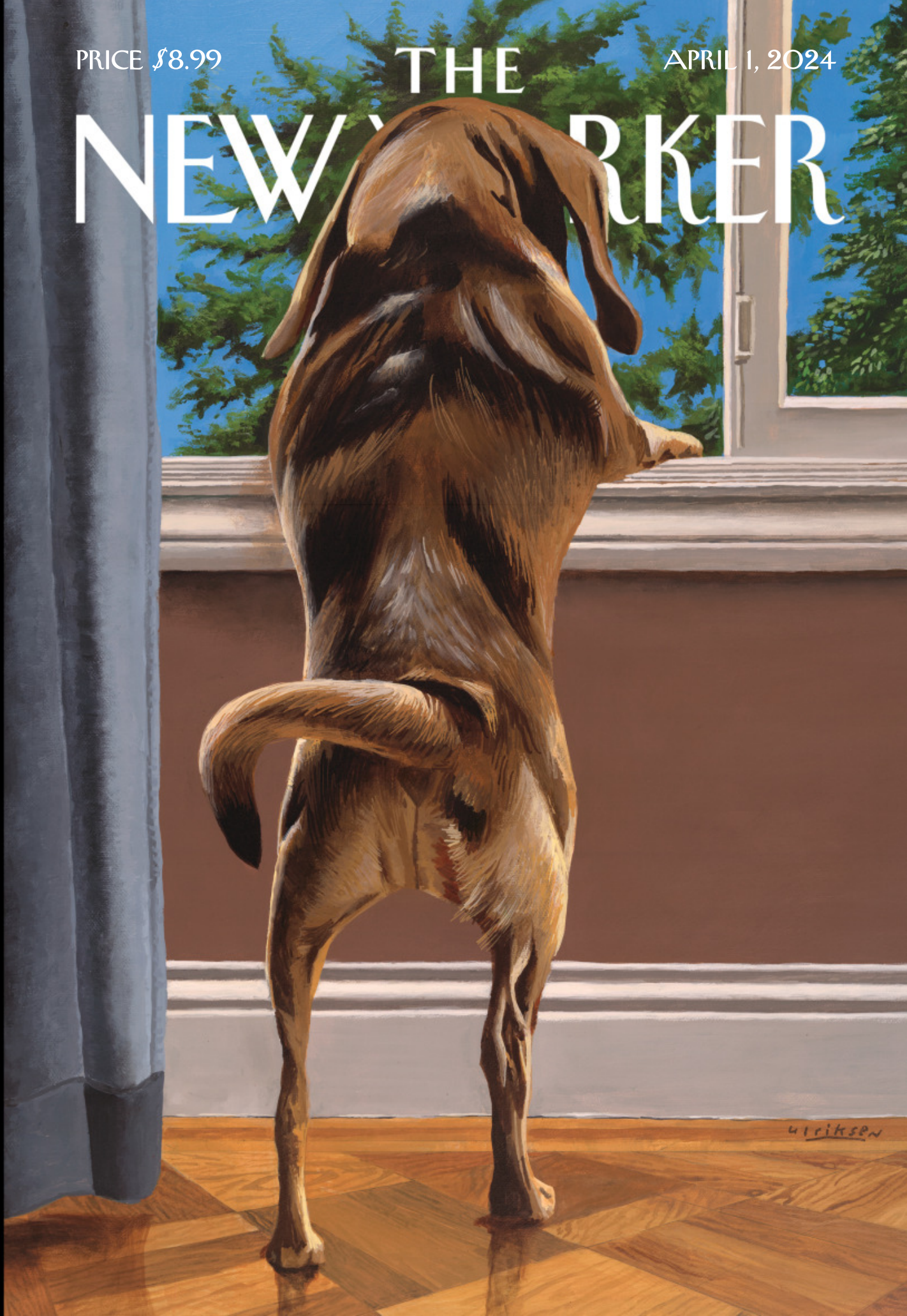

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

Clarissa Wei writes about her month of rest, relaxation, and regret at a Taiwanese postpartum-care center.

VIDEO

The short documentary "The Script" explores the interactions between doctors and trans patients.

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LEFT: CAMILLE DESCHIENS; RIGHT: MULTITUDE FILMS

THE MAIL

BEFORE THE BRAND

I was thrilled to see Jackson Arn's review of a new biography of my dear friend Keith Haring, but I found Arn's take on Haring's "brand" a bit cynical (Books, March 11th). Believe it or not, back in the old days we actually did things for the joy of them. When I met Keith, I had starred in a number of beyond-low-budget films. I was strolling across Astor Place, dressed in a black straw picture hat and a bouffant dress, when Keith approached me in front of the Cube and asked to take my picture. I struck a pose. He then handed me one of his "Radiant Baby" buttons, explaining that he gave them to everyone. He ended up becoming one of the artists at the Fun Gallery, which I co-founded and ran.

When Keith made his "Crack Is Wack" mural, he handed kids roller brushes. "Art is for everybody" was not a selling point but a mission. The shameless and posthumous branding of artists such as Keith and Jean-Michel Basquiat might be better attributed to entities like the licensing agency Artestar, employed by both the Haring Foundation and the Basquiat estate.

Patti Astor
Hermosa Beach, Calif.

GOD AND MAN

James Wood might have reached fewer negative conclusions about Marilynne Robinson's "Reading Genesis" if he had acknowledged to a greater extent the context that informs her commitment to Calvinism (Books, March 11th). Central to her world view are both the "old covenant" of the Old Testament, which posits a strict legalism requiring ritual sacrifice for disobeying God's law, and the "new covenant" of the New Testament, which fulfills the old by offering grace and forgiveness of sin to all who accept Christ's gospel of love and redemption. Calvinism, often maligned, misrepresented, and misunderstood, does not dwell on the "afterlife" but focusses on the here and now; it is not obsessed with Hell and damnation but emphasizes renewal, a transformed life enabled by divine grace. For the practical Calvinist, everything is sacred—including the beauty and perfection of our planet and every person on it.

Alida Young
Framingham, Mass.

Wood's childhood fear of and fascination with the idea of the earth being filled with the glory of God "as the waters cover the sea," a Biblical line that he encountered in a Victorian hymn, rested on his interpretation of the word "as." Rather than hearing a promise of "an annihilating but glorious flood" (reading "as" as "while"), one could read the same line as describing a future acknowledgment of God's glory spreading as wide as the sea ("as" as "just like"). The latter meaning is made clear in the original Hebrew, which uses the letter "kaph" (כ) ("just like") to make the comparison.

Bezalel Stern
Washington, D.C.

How does one reconcile the Robinson who wrote "Housekeeping" with the author of her later works, which are preoccupied with God and Providence? Though it bordered at times on the mystical, "Housekeeping" didn't seem to propound any explicit or implicit religious perspective; rather, it seemed to deal with the illusions of everyday life and the fragility of civilization. Only in retrospect do I feel as if I missed something about Robinson's writing. Of course, "Housekeeping," like any other great novel, can be appreciated in different ways by different kinds of reader. Yet it felt somehow deeply disappointing to find out, four decades on, that her luminous prose and otherworldly wisdom seem to be concerned mostly with how dismal, in her view, life is without faith.

Barry Edelson
Huntington, N.Y.

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Photo: Grants from The Trust—made possible by donors like you—support nonprofits like Sundog Theatre. Photo by Casey Kelbaugh

GOINGS ON

MARCH 27 – APRIL 2, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

The fall of the Soviet Union set the stage figuratively and, in the case of Almeida Theatre's **"Patriots,"** literally, for the rise of Vladimir Putin. In the play by Peter Morgan (who also plied levers of power as the creator of Netflix's "The Crown"), the patriots in question are corporate oligarchs concerned for Russia's future, including the billionaire Boris Berezovsky (Michael Stuhlbarg), who taps a St. Petersburg politician, a then obscure Putin (Will Keen), to succeed President Boris Yeltsin. After a year in London, where Keen's performance garnered an Olivier Award, the production arrives stateside, just in time for our own momentous election. Helmed by the Almeida's artistic director, Rupert Goold, "Patriots" marks Netflix's début as a Broadway producer. Ah, the beauty of capitalism.—*Dan Stahl (Barrymore; previews begin April 1.)*

ABOUT TOWN

DANCE | When Trisha Brown died, in 2017, the **Trisha Brown Dance Company,** which had been performing her works for decades, had to find a way to go on. In 2022, for the first time, it invited a guest choreographer to make a piece; this year, the young Frenchman Noé Soulier's "In the Fall" marks its second such creation. It will be performed alongside "Glacial Decoy," a work from 1979 that's both regal and haunting, featuring five dancers in diaphanous white dresses who lope and glide in front of projections of coolly neutral black-and-white images. The evocative set design is by Robert Rauschenberg.—*Marina Harss (Joyce Theatre; March 26-31.)*

BROADWAY | Though twenty years removed from the tearjerking film and another eight from the Nicholas Sparks novel, the musical **"The Notebook"** feels as fresh as the rainwater that drenches the meant-for-each-other lovers Noah and Allie. Kudos go to the directors Michael Greif and Schele Williams, whose sensitive staging involves physically situating an older Noah and Allie alongside their younger selves. (The characters are each played by three actors, at different ages.) Similarly inspired are the stylishly color-coded costumes by Paloma Young; Ben Stanton's corresponding blue-and-gold lighting; and Bekah Brunstetter's book, which never lacks for feeling or humor, even if it could use more second-act plot. Ingrid Michaelson's songs get the job done, and some of the performances flabbergast, especially that of Maryann Plunkett, as the oldest, dementia-stricken Allie. Bring tissues.—*Dan Stahl (Schoenfeld; open run.)*

ALT-POP | When the British singer **Arlo Parks** released her first album, "Collapsed in Sunbeams," in 2021, she appeared as a fully formed artist dealing in a soulful, musing alt-pop sound, her confessional songcraft glowing with all the wonder and angst of youth; it scored her the Mercury Prize, for the best record released in the U.K. or Ireland. Parks's second album, "My Soft Machine," released last year, felt a bit less personal but more ambitious by an order of magnitude, adding the producer Ariel Rechtshaid (Adele, Vampire Weekend) and the Brockhampton beat-maker Romil Hemnani to fill out its soft-rock palette. In the cradle-song melodies of a Phoebe Bridgers collaboration, "Pegasus," and the SZA-ish dream-pop of "Puppy," the hazy details of a reverie come into focus.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Steel; April 2.)*

BROADWAY | The title of the new musical **"Water for Elephants,"** adapted from Sara Gruen's 2006 novel, is slightly misleading. There's only one elephant, Rosie (a lovable puppet designed by Ray Wetmore and J. R. Goodman), and she prefers whiskey. But as the ringmaster (played by a thrilling, chilling Paul Alexander Nolan) of Rosie's Depression-era circus declares of audiences, "You gotta give 'em lies." He'd know, as he bitterly watches his wife and star performer (Isabelle McCalla) drift toward a handsome young veterinarian (Grant Gustin) hired to treat his overworked animals. The good-woman-cruel-man-gallant-savior triangle is nothing new, but Jessica Stone's staging, Rick Elice's dialogue, and the acrobatic choreography are so energetic that it's hard to mind. The show's music, by PigPen Theatre Company, fares best when channelling the circus's zaniness.—*D. S. (Imperial; open run.)*

ART | It's been almost fifty years since **Eric Fischl** began to paint well-nourished, spiritually starved people trapped in bright bourgeois cocoons. His style hasn't changed greatly along the way, and that's probably for the best, stasis being one of his major themes. For his new series, "Hotel Stories," he renders bodies with the usual smudgy virtuosity, packing each image with lively details that somehow bring out the over-all emptiness of the setting. The sneakily claustrophobic "Last Days at Tender Cove" shows two lovers resting on a bed in a room that overlooks beautiful, luminous waters—unless the windows are just electronic screens. Lushness with a bitter finish: I'm not sure there's another artist working today who does it better.—*Jackson Arn (Skarstedt; through May 4.)*

MOVIES | The grandiose title of the Romanian director Radu Jude's new film, **"Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World,"** matches his artistic and social ambitions. The nearly three-hour movie details an overwhelmingly busy Sunday in the life of a Bucharest-based production assistant named Angela (Ilinca Manolache), who's working on an industrial-safety video. She fights through traffic to meet prospective interview subjects, who recount their appalling stories of accidents and injuries; she faces her haughty Austrian bosses; she makes foul-mouthed satirical Instagram videos. The movie centers filmmaking itself, by way of clips from an actual 1981 Romanian film about a female cabdriver whose story connects surprisingly with Angela's own, and in a scene of the safety-video shoot that's as uproarious as it is outrageous.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY VALENTIN TKACH

TABLES FOR TWO

Quique Crudo
27 Bedford St.

Is it spring break yet? If you're in the mood for beach—and by the last week of March who isn't—you might head to Quique Crudo, a tiny walk-in-only restaurant in the West Village, where the chef Cosme Aguilar is serving exquisite Mexican seafood dishes, potent cocktails, and upscale chill vibes: a vacation in one sitting. Aguilar and his brother, Luis, who grew up in Chiapas, made their name with the city's first Michelin-starred Mexican restaurant, Casa Enrique, specializing in exceptional traditional Mexican food in Long Island City since 2012. At Quique, which the brothers opened in December, Aguilar brings some of those dishes to Manhattan while turning up the heat, the elegance, the artfulness.

It's clear that Aguilar values beauty and craftsmanship, from the clean design of the pristine cooking stations to the handsome ceramic and wooden serving pieces and the meticulous plating. If you sit at the main, black-quartz bar (the seats are all barstools, and the best face the long, open galley kitchen), you can watch the ballet of chefs as one of them—often Aguilar himself—crafts, say, a perfect crab tostada, piling fresh jumbo lump meat with serrano pepper, avocado crema, and copious lime juice atop a crisp tortilla. Or you can be mesmerized by someone painstakingly dropping dots of olive oil into a scallop shell, around a circle of sliced live diver scallop in a deeply savory soy-lime *aguachile* sauce. The menu is dominated by ceviches and *aguachiles* (or "chili water," generally spicier), but there's also a luscious peanut-studded steak-tartare tostada, and chicken enchiladas in a soulful mole that's chocolaty, sweet, and spicy, from a family recipe. One perfectly seared scallop atop potato hash, cashews, house-made chorizo, and chipotle aioli successfully makes its case for the restraint of including only one scallop—just don't share.

Bad Hombre, in the East Village, another of a recent spate of Mexican seafood-and-cocktail spots, serves crudos and *aguachiles* along with snacks such as a lovely crisp-fried-cod tostada, in a sexy underground-clublike atmosphere. But Quique is in another league—as TikTok has noticed, making weekend dinner a waiting game. One Saturday after 10 P.M., two young women, dressed for a night out, grabbed the last two bar seats and promptly ordered cucumber-laced *aguachile* margaritas, oysters, and lobster ceviche—the last a deceptively modest-sounding dish featuring a whole tail, both claws, and the knuckles of a poached Maine lobster, gorgeously arrayed atop a whipped coconut-milk cloud spiked with ginger and salsa macha. The women were giddy with delight over the food, and they asked Aguilar if he wanted to party. He politely demurred, and they continued their feast unbothered. All that was missing was a sea breeze, but no one seemed to mind. *(Dishes $18–$49.)*

—Shauna Lyon

PICK THREE

The staff writer Naomi Fry shares favorite comfort comedy rewatches.

1. When I need to relax, I rewatch old episodes of **"Nathan for You."** On the reality-comedy show—which ran on Comedy Central 2013-17 (it's now on MAX)—Nathan Fielder plays an incredibly awkward, low-key malicious consultant attempting to help real-life small-business owners with harebrained management schemes. "Nathan for You" is admittedly a counterintuitive choice for comfort viewing, but knowing in advance how high-cringe the interactions will get has helped me let go of my vicarious embarrassment and simply revel in how pee-your-pants funny the show is. I've introduced my twelve-year-old daughter to it; it's important to teach the next generation.

2. Another great rewatch is John Mulaney and Nick Kroll's **"Oh, Hello,"** which opened on Broadway in 2016 and was released as a Netflix special. George St. Geegland (Mulaney) and Gil Faizon (Kroll) are pervy, petty, self-aggrandizing septuagenarians from the Upper West Side who love talking shit almost as much as they love Steely Dan. The bull's-eye cultural specificity of the characters—"I am neither Jewish nor a woman, but like many men over the age of seventy I have reached that point in life where I am somehow both," St. Geegland says—makes me laugh and laugh.

3. Choosing a favorite season of **"The Simpsons"** is a real fool's errand, but when pressed I'll always go for Season 4, which, for my money, is the gold standard of comfort comedy rewatching. Life got you down? Put on "Marge vs. the Monorail" or "Lisa's First Word" for the millionth time, and I dare you not to feel just a little bit better.

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THE NEW YORKER

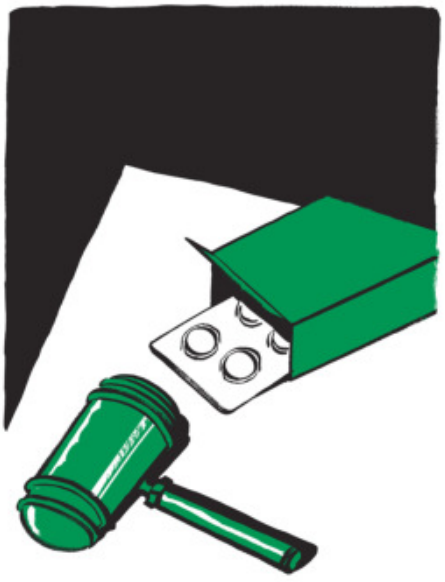
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THE NEXT ABORTION BATTLE

The briefs that the Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine has filed with the Supreme Court in its effort to restrict access to mifepristone—a drug that has been used for decades, with demonstrated safety, in medical abortions—contain some remarkably dubious assertions. One is that the Justices are only being asked to uphold a very "modest" lower-court order. That decision would undo a series of rule changes made by the Food and Drug Administration (which approved mifepristone in 2000), beginning in 2016, that increased the drug's availability. "Women will still have access to chemical abortion under the same protections that existed for the first 16 years of mifepristone's use," the A.H.M. writes. This is, of course, nonsense. As both the A.H.M. and the Justices—who will hear oral arguments in the case on Tuesday—know quite well, women in the United States do not have the same access to *any* type of abortion that they did in 2016.

In March, 2016, when the F.D.A. made the first of the rule changes that the A.H.M.—a medical group whose members, it says, oppose abortion with "purity and holiness"—is challenging, Donald Trump had not yet secured the Republican nomination, let alone appointed three Justices. As President, he remade the Court even as he transformed his party. We now live in a reality shaped not by Roe v. Wade but by Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, the 2022 decision that found that there is no constitutional right to abortion. Questions about reproductive health are being decided in a judicial and political atmosphere tinged with Trumpism: unrestrained and heedless of compassion.

Most commonly, mifepristone (also called RU-486, the abortion pill) is used in combination with a second drug, misoprostol, which helps to complete the process. Until 2016, the F.D.A. had approved mifepristone's use only up to the seventh week of pregnancy; that was expanded to ten weeks. At the same time, the F.D.A. reduced the number of clinical visits required for a medical abortion from three to one, and allowed licensed medical professionals who are not doctors, such as nurse practitioners, to prescribe abortion pills. (States can write stricter rules.) In 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, the F.D.A. began permitting the clinical visit to take place via telemedicine, and pharmacies to deliver the pills by mail.



These adjustments would make sense in any context; they were based on a battery of studies encompassing tens of thousands of people, and on the real-world experience of millions, all of which showed that the associated risks are extremely low. According to an amicus brief from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and other groups, mifepristone "has a safety profile comparable to that of ibuprofen." The ACOG brief also emphasizes that easier access is crucial to low-income and rural patients, many of whom live in what are called "maternity-care deserts."

Entire stretches of the country are now undergoing rapid desertification, in terms of reproductive health. A study released last week by the Guttmacher Institute shows how the terrain is shifting—and how people are trying to find their way through the land of Dobbs. Fourteen states, including Texas, Missouri, and Indiana, have banned almost all abortions; Guttmacher found that in states that bordered those fourteen the number of abortions in the formal medical system had increased by thirty-seven per cent since 2020. (Nationally, the increase was ten per cent.) That number suggests that Dobbs has levied a travel tax: Guttmacher estimates that a hundred and sixty thousand people crossed state lines to obtain an abortion last year.

The Guttmacher report demonstrates how essential mifepristone is. Between 2020 and 2023, the proportion of medical abortions rose from fifty-three per

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

cent to sixty-three. (In 2014, the number was thirty-one per cent.) Guttmacher cited a study finding that online-only providers now account for eight per cent of abortions. Telemedicine is not a panacea; pharmacies cannot mail the pills to or even within every state, and some people would prefer to be cared for in person. And ten weeks is still a relatively narrow window. But more access helps.

It's the stubborn endurance of that potential for choice, rather than any fear about medical safety, that appears to lie behind lawsuits such as that of the Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine. The group says on its Web site that its members are committed to protecting life "from the moment of fertilization." That credo is a reminder that the fight is not only about abortion but about many forms of contraception and miscarriage care, and—as evidenced by recent court rulings on "fetal personhood" in Alabama—the availability of I.V.F. The litigation demonstrates, too, the falsity of the idea that Dobbs would simply return the question of abortion to the states.

The mifepristone case emerged from the Fifth Circuit, which, as Vox put it, has become the nation's "Trumpiest court." Still, it is shocking that the case has come this far. To bring a suit, parties are supposed to show "standing"—meaning that they have been harmed in some direct way that a court can remedy. The A.H.M.'s contention is that some of its members are doctors who theoretically might encounter patients in an emergency room who needed care after taking mifepristone and be forced to treat them in some manner that could violate those doctors' consciences. It's not clear that this has ever happened. The A.H.M. also argues that treating these patients would divert "time and resources" from those its members do approve of.

Normally, the Court asks for far more than such speculation to establish harm. If, nonetheless, the Court finds that the A.H.M. has standing, the most vulnerable provisions will be the ones allowing for by-mail prescriptions and, perhaps, telemedicine. Their fate would depend on whether the Justices read an 1873 law known as the Comstock Act as banning the mailing of medications used for any abortion or only for an illegal one.

A hundred and forty-five Republican senators and representatives submitted an amicus brief in support of the A.H.M. Meanwhile, two hundred and sixty-three Democratic members of Congress submitted a brief supporting the F.D.A. and continued broad access to mifepristone. Those duelling briefs reflect a growing divide on reproductive rights between the parties—if not their voters. Polls continue to show that a majority of Americans support access to abortion, with some limits. And, as was the case in 2016, both Trump and reproductive rights are on the ballot.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

TRAILBLAZERS DEPT.

UNBOSSED

When the actor Regina King was growing up, in Los Angeles, she would tell people that she was related to Martin Luther King, Jr. "My birthday is the same as Dr. King's," she explained recently. Congress made the date a federal holiday in 1983, after years of lobbying led by Coretta Scott King. But Regina King started going to elementary school in the nineteen-seventies. "I got away with it for three grades, to get out of doing things in school," she said. " 'My family, they've been working so hard to make my uncle's birthday a national holiday, and the government just doesn't coöperate.' My teachers would be, like, 'You poor child.' Maybe that was my first moment of subconsciously showing that I could be an actor."

King has won an Oscar, a Golden Globe, and four Emmys. She has starred in a wide range of movies and TV shows, including "If Beale Street Could Talk," "The Leftovers," "Seven Seconds," and "American Crime." She also voiced two characters on "The Boondocks," an animated series that often satirized Black political figures, including M.L.K. himself. King's latest film is "Shirley," now streaming on Netflix, about Shirley Chisholm, the first Black congresswoman, from Brooklyn, who in 1972 also became the first Black person—and the first woman—to run for the Democratic Presidential nomination. (She lost handily in the primary to George McGovern, who went on to lose handily to Richard Nixon.) King plays Chisholm and produced the movie with her sister, Reina, a process that took fifteen years. King said they made the movie because they were tired of people not knowing who Chisholm was.

In 2019, Governor Andrew Cuomo unveiled Shirley Chisholm State Park, in Brooklyn: four hundred acres on the northern shore of Jamaica Bay. Although the park has some views of the Manhattan skyline, it's mostly just a big open field with brown grasses and a series of gravel paths. Planes constantly roar overhead. (J.F.K. Airport is not far away.) During a recent trip to New York, King visited the park. It was largely deserted. "Very cool that Brooklyn did this for her," King said. She wore a black jumpsuit and sneakers.

King inspected a chalkboard sign at the entrance: "NO BBQ. NO PETS. NO MOTOR VEHICLES." King looked slightly disturbed. "No barbecue?" she said. "Oh, maybe no *barbecuing*. My mind went straight to, like, That's *racial*."

Regina King in "Shirley"

She headed down Red Tail Trail, on the western side of the park. Every now and then, she'd pass a sign with a Chisholm quote, such as "Be as bold as the first man or woman to eat an oyster." King first heard about Chisholm in school, during Black History Month. "The teachers would choose a Black hero

each day to celebrate, for two minutes of the curriculum," she said. Through the years, King watched other politicians characterize themselves as trailblazers, arguably at the expense of Chisholm's legacy. In 1984, Jesse Jackson became the second African American to run for the Democratic nomination. "Reina and I were, like, 'Oh, I guess he's not gonna say anything about Shirley. O.K.,'" King said. Same goes for Hillary Clinton. When Clinton ran for the Democratic nomination in 2016, King was working on the script for the bio-pic. She thought about including a modern-day scene in which a Black reporter asked Clinton about her political journey. "We were going to have Hillary mention Shirley Chisholm, because we hadn't *heard* Shirley mentioned," King said. "We were, like, O.K., we're gonna do *you* a favor, Hillary."

In recent years, Vice-President Kamala Harris has paid tribute to Chisholm, referring to her in speeches and even adopting some of Chisholm's campaign imagery. "One thing about Shirley—and this is no disrespect to Kamala—is that Shirley was really big on no gimmicks," King said. (Her slogan was "Unbought and Unbossed.") "Shirley was just unapologetically Shirley." She suddenly shifted into Shirley Voice: "Either you like me or you don't." The congresswoman's accent was a mix of Brooklyn and Bajan, which took King a year to master. "I find myself slipping into it sometimes," King said.

On Red Tail Trail, two women went sprinting by—the first signs of life in the park. "Let's go!" a man shouted from a distance. "You want to get medals!" The man seemed to be their coach, or their overbearing father, or both. He berated them for slowing down. "Jog properly!" he yelled, several times. He sounded Jamaican.

"I love it," King said. She said it was only right to encounter that accent, and that work ethic, in Chisholm's park.

A few minutes later, there was another sign of life: a huge rodent darted across the trail and burrowed into the ground. A sign near the burrow explained that the park was built on the site of the former Pennsylvania Avenue landfill. "Oh, so Shirley gets a landfill?" King said, shaking her head. "Still, you gotta appreciate the beauty in the bruises."

—Tyler Foggatt

VISITING DIGNITARY
ANTI-TECHNOFEUDALISM

"I never planned to be a politician. Never. Not in my wildest nightmares," the economist and former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis said the other day. He was fighting his way toward the exit at Columbia University's Alfred Lerner Hall, where he'd just spoken at a conference on sustainable development. A man blocked his path: "Five minutes, Professor?" He introduced himself as a U.N. employee. "I'm Italian," he said.

"Nobody's perfect," Varoufakis said, laughing. "I'm Greek."

Varoufakis, who is tall and bald, with a rakish demeanor, wore boots and a black trenchcoat, like a character from "The Matrix." In 2015, amid one of the worst financial crises in Greece's history, he was appointed by the country's new left-wing government to try to save the financial system and to fend off punishing austerity measures that the country's creditors had proposed in exchange for a bailout. (During the negotiations, the *Financial Times* called him "the most irritating man in the room.") The press referred to Varoufakis as the "rock-star finance minister" and noted his leather jackets and glamorous artist wife, Danae Stratou. "So what that I have a motorcycle," he said. "I live in Athens—there's no way you can get around in a car."

Varoufakis is still bitter about the way his tenure ended, six months in. He was criticized for appearing in a flashy *Paris Match* spread at a time when Greeks were suffering economically, and, shortly before the country's Prime Minister abruptly agreed to the type of bailout that Varoufakis had been resisting, he resigned. ("I shall wear the creditors' loathing with pride," he wrote on his blog.)

"I wanted to do one thing," he said, hailing a cab to take him to the Guggenheim Museum, a regular New York stop. "Restructure Greece's debt. If you're bankrupt, and your bankruptcy gets bigger by getting more credit cards, this is a cycle. I wanted to break this doom loop. And I failed." He added, "I don't regret it for a second. But politics stinks."

Varoufakis just published his seventeenth book, called "Technofeudalism." Capitalism, he argues, has been replaced by a new economic system that's more dangerous than anything Marx could have conjured. The big tech companies—Meta, Amazon, Apple, Alphabet—control our attention and mediate our transactions, he says, turning humans into

TAKING YOUR EYES OFF THE ROAD WHILE USING THIS SYSTEM COULD CAUSE A CRASH, RESULTING IN INJURY OR DEATH TO YOU OR OTHERS. PLEASE DO NOT LOOK AT THIS SCREEN AND FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION ON DRIVING AT ALL TIMES
(CONTINUED ON PAGE 2)
OK
T. SIEGEL + D. KIRKWOOD

digital serfs incessantly posting, scrolling, and buying on their platforms. Rather than chasing profits that derive from labor, the tech overlords, whom he calls "cloudalists," extract "rents."

In the book, Varoufakis refers to Homer, Hesiod, "Mad Men," F.D.R., Batman, and Thomas Edison to illustrate what has happened since people started staring at smartphones for most of their waking hours. Under feudalism, a landowner would grant fiefs to vassals, who would farm the land and give a portion of the yield to the landowner. Varoufakis writes that Jeff Bezos's "relationship with the vendors on amazon.com is not too dissimilar." But the new setup is a bigger threat to representative government than even the old capitalism was.

The cab pulled up to the Guggenheim. As Varoufakis paid the fare, he explained that although he's a critic of technology, he still uses it, especially X. "I'm all day on Twitter," he said. "I hate it. Was it Stephen Fry, the English writer and actor, who said that it's like taking all the graffiti from male toilets and posting it online?"

Varoufakis hadn't checked the museum's exhibition schedule but said that he liked surprises. A show called "Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility" featured images of people wearing hoodies and shrouds, and eerie sculptures of staggering giants bathed in green light. As he peered at the shadowy figures, he said that the only thing that could counter the new tech feudalism was a revolution in which citizens took control of the algorithms and put them under democratic oversight. "A tall order," he admits in the book.

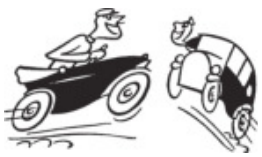
He stared at a large Chris Ofili painting that was almost entirely blue. "When I get seriously depressed, it's art, music, and 'Star Trek,'" he said. "I'm a Trekkie, by the way. Absolutely fanatical. I've seen every single one." He especially loves "The Next Generation," in which Patrick Stewart plays Captain Jean-Luc Picard. "The major reason why I like it is because it's a post-capitalist, socialist world," he said. "There's no money. There's no profit. And there is the primary directive: We do not interfere with other races. Which is exactly the opposite of the imperialist directive."

He recalled a favorite episode, in which the Enterprise crew thaws several people who were cryogenically frozen: "There is a fantastic dialogue between Captain Picard and a businessman from the nineteen-nineties who demands to see his lawyer because he had a lot of investments on Wall Street. And Picard says, 'My friend, these were all illusions which are no longer current. We have overcome the need for material possessions.'"

The ideal system, Varoufakis went on, might be called "anti-technofeudalism." "With technology working for all of us in a perfectly democratic way, and the removal of systematic exploitation on the basis of who owns what—that's 'Star Trek,'" he said. "Whereas I hate 'Star Wars.' 'Star Wars' is the Middle Ages, with laser guns."

—*Sheelah Kolhatkar*

DEPT. OF MOTOR VEHICLES
GREEN MACHINES



Chris Mazzilli is a restorer of vintage cars, the kind you buy during a midlife crisis. "We primarily work on Corvettes, muscle cars, and classics," he said the other day at Dream Car Restorations, his shop on Long Island. He also does "restomods"—custom updates of old vehicles. Three and a half years ago, one of his clients, a TV and film producer named Jay Peterson ("We built a really cool '73 Ford Bronco for him"), was having dinner in the Hamptons with Robert Downey, Jr., and a colleague who works on the actor's climate initiative, FootPrint Coalition. When Downey spotted Peterson's ride, a '68 Camaro convertible, he asked who'd restored it—he wanted to give his own cars an eco-friendly facelift.

It turned out that Mazzilli already knew Downey. The actor, he learned, had decided that his environmental work was incompatible with his collection of gas-guzzlers, and he asked Mazzilli to turn them green; then he'd sell them to fund his charity. "You're probably better off doing a sweepstakes," Mazzilli advised him. "I just did one for thirty-six Corvettes." Mazzilli got to work modifying Downey's cars, and they chronicled the process for a docuseries on Max, "Downey's Dream Cars," in which the actor employs his motormouthed swagger to prove that, if electric cars are cool enough for Iron Man, they're cool enough for you.

This week, the fleet, six cars in all, will be on display at the New York International Auto Show, at the Javits Center, where the first sweepstakes winner will be announced. Beforehand, the cars were temporarily parked at Mazzilli's shop, in Plainview. Mazzilli showed a visitor around the garage. "This upside-down thing is a 1956 Corvette," he said, beside a fibreglass husk that looked like a horseshoe crab's exoskeleton. Mazzilli was born in 1965—the same year as his prized fuel-injected Corvette coupe—and has thinning silver hair and transition-lens glasses. When he was growing up, in Northport, he recalled, "my dad used to tell me stories about how he would race this '58 Bel Air in Queens. So at a very young age I loved cars." After studying menswear design at F.I.T., Mazzilli tried acting—he did a couple of "Law & Order" spots—then became a standup comic. In 1996, he opened Gotham Comedy Club, in Chelsea, which he still owns. He used his earnings to buy his father a 1964 Chevrolet Impala SS, then started his own collection, including a '69 little red Corvette, which he'd driven to work that morning.

Downey's cars were outside, in the parking lot. "Robert was very specific about what he wanted done to the cars—color-wise and types of wheels," Mazzilli said. He showed off a '72 VW Bus, which

Robert Downey, Jr.

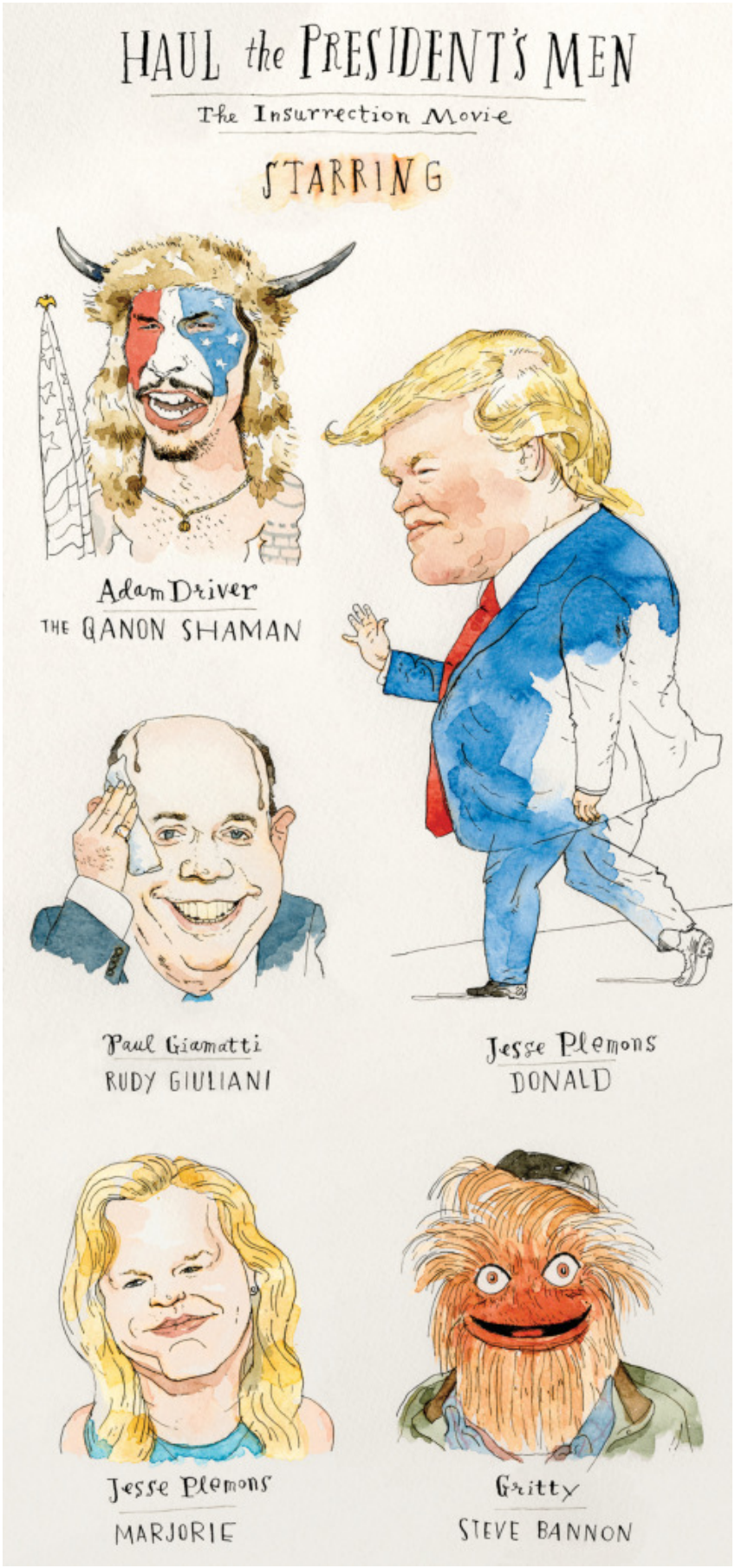
Downey had bought from a guy in the Hamptons. Mazzilli's team swapped the gas engine for a HyPer 9 electric motor and painted the car camel brown. As a surprise for Downey, they added a rollout electric grill in the back, powered by solar panels on the roof, which also held two sustainably made surfboards.

Nearby was Downey's '65 Corvette convertible. "This car had a three-twenty-seven-cubic-inch motor, with three hundred horsepower," Mazzilli said. "Now it's got twin electric motors in it—it's an electric Stingray!" The interior was outfitted with mushroom leather, and the body was painted midnight blue, with L.E.D. lights in the now ornamental exhaust pipes. (At the Chicago auto show, a kid had leaped onto the hood and scratched it.) An '85 El Camino was given a fuel-efficient engine, recycled from a busted pickup truck; vegan-leather interiors; and a solar panel that could charge a pair of e-bikes. Downey's '72 Chevy K10 pickup—which he'd nicknamed the Thanos Thumper, for its original purple sheen—was given a Tesla motor, with batteries disguised as a diamond-plated toolbox in the back, and was wrapped in slate-gray vinyl. Next up: a '69 Mercedes-Benz 280SE, which once belonged to Downey's mother. The restorers had painted it mint green, put in carpet made from recycled plastic bottles, and installed a biodiesel engine, which gives the car a cooking-oil aroma. In Chicago, Mazzilli recalled, "there was a police recruiting booth, and the cops were, like—*sniff*—'You guys smell French fries?'"

He climbed into the sixth car, a '66 Buick Riviera—a classic mid-century polluter—which had been given a new engine with twice the gas mileage, a matte peach finish, and an air-quality sensor on the roof. "Look at the dash, how simple that is," Mazzilli said, and took his visitor on a joyride around the parking lot. The car made a satisfying *vroom*. "Steers really nice," he said. "Cars today don't have this feel—kind of like analog compared to digital. You *feel* the car." Downey's recent triumph at the Oscars, where he earned the Best Supporting Actor prize, for "Oppenheimer," only added to his cars' cool factor, Mazzilli said. "How could it not? Not only can you win Robert Downey, Jr.,'s cars—but now he's an Oscar winner!"

—Michael Schulman

SKETCHPAD BY BARRY BLITT



CONSIDER THE GUN

The director Lila Neugebauer interrogates the ghosts of "Uncle Vanya."

BY HELEN SHAW

She has the same "detachment and compassion" as Chekhov, Heidi Schreck said.

One late-January day, the director Lila Neugebauer was at a gun range—or an antiseptic, fluorescent-white version of one—tucked inside the Specialists, Ltd., a theatrical-props behemoth in Ridgewood, Queens. Neugebauer, accompanied by two members of her team, had come to discuss a gun for her upcoming production of Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya," at Lincoln Center Theatre. The production is a starry one, with Steve Carell in the title role, alongside Alfred Molina, Alison Pill, Anika Noni Rose, and William Jackson Harper. With a new translation by the playwright Heidi Schreck—who was nominated for a Tony for her women's-rights jeremiad "What the Constitution Means to Me"—this is the first Broadway staging of Chekhov's masterpiece in more than twenty years.

Neugebauer is small and quick, with flyaway black hair, straight black brows crossing a narrow face, and intent gray-green-golden eyes, like a fox's. She is a rarity among New York theatrical directors, both for her relative youth—she's thirty-eight, with the career of someone a generation older—and for her recent move into film. According to Jennifer Lawrence, who starred in Neugebauer's 2022 movie début, "Causeway," about a soldier recovering from a brain injury, she is a "tiny genius with a boom in one hand and a sword in the other."

The director was having a breakneck season. In December, she had opened a blockbuster Broadway revival of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's "Appropriate"—a knockdown, drag-out inheritance drama set in a decaying plantation house, starring Sarah Paulson—and she was now negotiating its transfer to a larger venue. At the same time, she was in rehearsals at the Public for Itamar Moses's "The Ally," a weighty, campus-set play about a Jewish professor being urged to denounce Israeli policies, and she was deep into preparation for "Vanya," finessing the script with Schreck.

In Chekhov's sketch of country life, published in 1897, a recently retired professor, Alexander, and his young second wife, Yelena, move to an estate where Sonya, his grown daughter from his first marriage, and Vanya, his grouchy ex-brother-in-law, already live. Sad clown Vanya falls for Yelena, who also catches the eye of a local doctor, Astrov; Astrov, meanwhile, is adored by Sonya. The romantic pentagon's members are quarrelsome, foolish, and discombobulated by the passage of time—characters often describe themselves as being a bore or a burden, or as having missed their moment. Only ambivalent Astrov, whose true passion is forest conservation, takes the long view. "The people who are alive a hundred—two hundred years from now—what will they think of us?" he asks. When gentle Vanya enters waving a gun in Act III, Chekhov was, from the nineteenth century, predicting the twenty-first: he saw how easily clowns, if they sink far enough into self-pity, can turn toward violence.

The cliché of Chekhov's gun has been frequently misinterpreted. He did tell other writers that, if a gun appears in a play's first act, an audience will expect it to go off by the fourth. But people understand his advice backward, not as a warning about distracting details but as a prescription for heavy-handed foreshadowing—which is why you always know who did it in the first twenty minutes of a "Law & Order" episode. Chekhov didn't actually put guns in his famous first acts: the thing about a real Chekhov's gun is that you probably won't see it coming.

Neugebauer, wearing her winter uniform of wide-legged jeans and a long

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREAS LASZLO KONRATH

coat, needed to decide exactly what kind of fake firearm her lead would be handling. The accidental shooting on the set of the movie "Rust," in 2021, was on everyone's minds, and the prop experts at the Specialists had arranged a demonstration. "It's not like the old days," Paul Smithyman, the production manager of Lincoln Center Theatre, said, a bit wistfully. "You used to just walk up to this old store in midtown and order your gun, and they'd wrap it up for you to take away in brown paper, like a fish."

Any time a gun goes off onstage, safety—and, circuitously, the New York administrative code—demands that it be some sort of facsimile: for instance, a glorified cap gun, in which the hammer strikes a primer cap instead of a bullet, or a battery-operated "non-gun," which ignites a capsule to make an eye-catching muzzle flash. "One of the main limitations of the non-gun is that your batteries have to be brand-new, and they have to be nine volts or above to get the proper spark," a Specialists technician said. Neugebauer asked to film him before he took his firing position. "Non-gun, fire in the hole!" he announced.

Nothing happened.

Attention shifted to a primer-cap-loaded revolver. "In light of current conversations, and active involuntary-manslaughter indictments, what you're telling me is there is simply no universe in the design of this object where it can fire anything. It just cannot," Neugebauer said, enunciating each syllable. She tends to speak in complete, complex sentences, at what sounds like 1.5x speed. (Unprompted, four different collaborators mentioned her vocabulary to me. "Let me reach for my thesaurus," Sarah Paulson said dryly.)

The technician took his position again.

Bang! Bang! went the gun, right on cue.

With the choice settled, Neugebauer started puzzling through Vanya's behavior. "Why does *this* guy have a gun?" she asked the range at large, leaning on a high, stainless-steel table littered with dummy bullets. She and Schreck had removed "Vanya" from nineteenth-century Russia, instead setting it in an American near-future, which meant that the context for gun ownership had changed. "Is it a hunting gun someone left—?"

"I mean, it's a Chekhov play. There has to be a gun," the technician said.

By a stroke of fortune, at the same moment and in the same place that Chekhov was pioneering lyrical realism, the Russian theorist and actor Konstantin Stanislavsky was defining the craft we now consider directing. For about three thousand years, staging had been the province of writers, lead actors, or theatrical managers, whose responsibilities were part technical (read: thunder noises), part entrepreneurial. Blurring the line between comedy and tragedy in a convincing imitation of life, though, required something more visionary, and more subtle. Stanislavsky argued for a governing intellect in the rehearsal process, a person who would unify the acting style and oversee stage design to create a persuasive atmosphere. One aesthetic revolution depended on the other. The first performance of Chekhov's "The Seagull" was a fiasco—catcalls drowned out the cast. Under Stanislavsky's direction, two years later, the play was a riotous success. The craft of directing and Chekhov's playwriting are thus strongly linked. All the greats attempt him: Lee Strasberg directed "Three Sisters" in 1964; Peter Brook directed "The Cherry Orchard" in 1981; Katie Mitchell directed "Seagull" in 2006; Sam Mendes directed his "Cherry Orchard" in 2009. Now the task passes to Neugebauer.

"Uncle Vanya" will be the first pre-twentieth-century classic of her professional life. In her early career, she was mainly known for her work with the Mad Ones, a scrappy Off Off Broadway group she co-founded with four actor-writers. The first play I saw of theirs—and the second play Neugebauer directed in New York—was the Wes Anderson-inflected fantasia "Samuel & Alasdair: A Personal History of the Robot War," at a tiny Brooklyn theatre (and former garage) called the Brick, in 2010. The play imagines a Siberian radio station in a kind of Russian "War of the Worlds" scenario, with the broadcasters devotedly reproducing the sounds of Americana as killer robots approach. Mad Ones shows, almost all of which have been directed and co-created by Neugebauer, tend to immerse audiences in nostalgia for a time they may never have lived through, including "The Essential Straight & Narrow," a heartsick, bell-bottomed seventies throwback, and the acid-washed eighties comedy "Miles for Mary." In the course of a decade, the small company leapfrogged from microscopic spaces to well-established Off Broadway institutions, such as the Signature Theatre, where it's now in residence.

Success in more mainstream work came swiftly for Neugebauer. In 2015, she directed Sarah DeLappe's Pulitzer finalist "The Wolves," a bittersweet drama about a girls' soccer squad. After workshopping it with N.Y.U. undergraduates and drilling a young cast into an approximation of a functioning team, she took the play from the relatively obscure Playwrights Realm to a barnstorming run at Lincoln Center, in 2017. The next year, Neugebauer made a confident Broadway début with Kenneth Lonergan's plaintive comedy "The Waverly Gallery," another Pulitzer finalist, starring Lucas Hedges and Elaine May. It was nominated for a Tony for Best Revival; May won for Best Actress. Then, in 2019, Neugebauer—who had never stepped foot on a movie set before—began production on "Causeway." The film, which Jennifer Lawrence described to me as the "most creatively satisfying experience I ever had," garnered her co-star Brian Tyree Henry an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor.

I've seen fifteen of Neugebauer's New York shows, and, taken together, they form a remarkable syllabus. At the Signature, she directed several mid-century landmarks, including Adrienne Kennedy's expressionist tour de force "Funnyhouse of a Negro," from 1964, a portrait of a woman's hallucinatory dissolution into racial self-hatred. Near the end of that short, shocking show, a tortured Jesus, played by the late Mikéah Ernest Jennings, dragged himself across the floor, screaming, "*Through God Almighty I have tried to escape being black*," and it's one of the only times I've felt bone-deep dread in the theatre. Neugebauer has a gift for nightmare. She also directed latter-day classics, like the eerie première of Annie Baker's "The Antipodes," from 2017, which takes place in a vampiric writers' room, where time seems to slide from week to week. Neugebauer hired a magic consultant to design certain stage effects for the show: one minute people would be chatting around an empty conference table, and the next minute they'd be eating Thai noodles—which had somehow

appeared in front of them without a blackout. If there's no difference between "now" and "later," how can you tell where your life has gone?

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, whose "Appropriate" collaboration with Neugebauer is set to become the biggest commercial hit of his career to date, has been friends with her for a decade. They first worked together professionally in 2017, on his Pulitzer finalist "Everybody," at the Signature. For this reworked morality play, in which a lottery among the actors determined the casting each night, Neugebauer invented a new type of rehearsal structure to prepare for the dozens of potential configurations. In a Mad Ones show, she once condensed four hundred pages of improvisations generated by years of workshops into one dreamy, time-warping party scene. "She's like a Mentat from 'Dune,'" the actor-writer Michael Dalto said. "It's a visualization going on that we can't see."

Neugebauer doesn't have a single, easily identifiable aesthetic signature. She rarely features video, as the Euro-modernists Ivo Van Hove and Robert Icke do; nor does she rely on what I once heard Gregory Mosher, the former head of Lincoln Center Theatre, describe as "director sauce"—that is, an imposition onto a text, like, say, staging "King Lear" on Mars. It's notoriously difficult to isolate the qualities of fine direction when it refrains from elaborate gestures, however. "No one knows what directing is," Jacobs-Jenkins told me. He said that many directors in his and Neugebauer's shared age cohort "were trying to create a stylistic voice. But she ran in the opposite direction, where she invested in a classical clarity."

If Neugebauer specializes in anything, it is a sense of haunted quiet, which has become a dominant tone of American drama. Her shows often have a twilit waiting-room quality; the houses sometimes double as crypts. She and her frequent collaborator Lael Jellinek, a set designer, created one such liminal space for Itamar Moses's "The Ally," although the action takes place in a professor's office and his home. Inspired by a line in which a Palestinian student describes an American university as a "temple of ideas," Jellinek and Neugebauer chose ice-blue wall-to-wall carpet and sleek wood panelling to evoke a purgatory of endless inquiry. " 'Uncanny' is the word I would use," Moses said, then went on, "In 'Appropriate,' too, you know, we're literally in this house in Arkansas, or wherever it is, but it also feels like the *idea* of that house."

Neugebauer grew up in a family of four—she has an older sister, Sabina—in a prewar two-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side. Her mother, Eda Rak, is a therapist, and her father, Richard Neugebauer, is a historian turned epidemiologist who has studied the traumatic effects of the Rwandan genocide on its survivors. Rak has the same birdlike alertness as her daughter, though perhaps less of her droll reserve. She told me that when Lila was six years old they went to see "The Secret Garden," a musical with a fair amount of symbolic choreography. "Women behind us were saying, much too loudly, 'What the hell is going on? I can't figure it out,'" Rak recalled. "Lila turned around and said, in a hiss, 'When you get the red handkerchief, you die.'"

Still, Lila started out shy and watchful. Sabina provided her introduction to the theatre: she would stage little plays during the family's summers on Cape Cod, as a way to include her sister in activities with older, brasher kids. Growing up, Lila studied piano and took ballet classes. Rak quoted her daughter's ballet teacher: "She doesn't have talent. No talent. But I have rarely ever had a kid who was so intent, and so focussed on what she's doing." Lila was also the captain of a girls' soccer team, where she played a position called the "sweeper," patrolling behind the defensive line. She spent a lot of time looking at an expanse of green, working out what the patterns of bodies meant as they ran toward her.

When it comes to early signs of her sister's future career, Sabina remembers Lila playing with her doll house and collecting clocks. The larger influence, though, was the way that the family "has always been very focussed on storytelling," Sabina said. "We were brought up to have that kind of debriefing and breakdown and analysis." ("Not in an organized way," Lila said. "We were a *very* verbal household.") Rak's parents, both Polish Jews, fled the Holocaust, only to be captured at the border and sent to a labor camp in Russia's Far North. They immigrated to the Bronx when Rak was a young child. That history of trauma, Sabina observed, was "a core feature of all of our identities. It's like the water we drink. It was there, always. You know, my hamster died, and we were all crying. And my grandfather goes, 'Have you heard of the camps?'"

Lila's grandparents rarely spoke about life in the shtetl or their wartime experiences. "I remember my grandmother talking about a pair of shoes that she wore through, but that she still had to keep walking," Sabina told me. "There was no context. It was just this very small moment that she was thinking about." The family would try to reconstruct entire histories from these fragments.

From seventh grade on, Neugebauer attended Hunter College High School, in a fortresslike converted armory, which invites only top-scoring students in the city to apply. In her first year, she appeared as a Partygoer in a school production of "7 Minutes in Heaven," directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who was then a senior at Hunter. In her last year, Neugebauer, too, would direct a senior show, a smorgasbord of absurd comedies by Christopher Durang and David Ives. "I had a revelatory experience as a seventeen-year-old directing a play, where I was, like, 'Oh, I feel like myself,'" she said.

Neugebauer went to Yale, where, after a flirtation with art history, she became an English major. She read the British playwright Sarah Kane for the first time. Kane's plays of the late nineties are Stygian shockers, full of an absorbing darkness. Neugebauer thinks now that she was drawn to Kane and her cadre because of "certain waves of depression my whole life. I didn't know—I think I didn't know. I wouldn't figure that out until my late twenties," she said. We were having breakfast at Café Mogador, in Manhattan, after the visit to the prop warehouse. "I was thinking this morning, How is it I've never done a play with a gun?" Neugebauer said. "And there were no weapons in my movie." But when she was grappling with Kane, whom she had hoped to study in her postgraduate

work, she said, "I wrote all these involved, exegetical proposals, about the representation of violence."

At Yale, she encountered people who would inform her taste and her intellectual approach—like the historian Marc Robinson, who has written about the experimental American theatrical canon. Though Neugebauer didn't study directing formally, she started making shows in basements with student casts and finagling her way into places where she could learn the craft. In 2004, Brian Tyree Henry was in his first year of an acting M.F.A. at what was then called the Yale School of Drama. "We didn't open up our rehearsals or our shows to the undergrads, right? But somehow Lila was there," he told me. She was also friends with Zoe Kazan, who would go on to write plays that Neugebauer directed. "She's the first person I knew who had a signature scent—as a nineteen-year-old," Kazan said. "There was something really purposeful in her aesthetic decisions." After college, Neugebauer worked in the literary offices (departments where scripts are read and evaluated) at Steppenwolf, in Chicago, and then at Berkeley Rep, where her boss, Madeleine Oldham, suggested that she apply to a directing residency at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, in Kentucky.

The Mad Ones originated in Kentucky in 2008: all the other founders were, at one point or another, in the Actors Theatre's apprenticeship program, one of only a few such programs in the country at the time. (It no longer exists.) Sarah Lunnie, the Mad Ones' dramaturge, remembers that Neugebauer was living "in a rambling Victorian mansion with two of the literary interns, making her own work at night." (Neugebauer described it as "deeply ramshackle.") Neugebauer met the actor Marc Bovino, and they co-created an immersive work called "Karen's Party" in that house. "The conceit of the piece was that you move from scene to scene, and each scene was about two minutes long, but you were watching the same two minutes over and over again," Lunnie said. "It was like a photo developing of this community of young people at a party. It ended in this macabre way: the final image was Karen—you know, it was Karen's party—dead in a bathtub upstairs."

Neugebauer and Bovino, along with Michael Dalto, Joe Curnutte, and Stephanie Wright Thompson, founded the Mad Ones with no money: their first fund-raiser after they moved to New York was a chili cook-off that raised four hundred dollars. What they did have, though, was a dedication to collaborative creation (as opposed to a reliance on an existing text) and the tools to devise rich, complex characters out of writing exercises and improvisation.

In 2009, Neugebauer moved back in with her parents on the Upper West Side, and she took on odd jobs and began assisting on shows and directing student productions at Juilliard. James Houghton, who founded the Signature and was the head of the Juilliard drama division, was bowled over by her work. In 2014, Houghton hired Neugebauer, who was then twenty-nine, to direct a revival of A. R. Gurney's "The Wayside Motor Inn," at the Signature; it was her first production of that size in New York. She was nominated for a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Director, and the show won for Outstanding Ensemble. (Houghton, her champion, died in 2016; one of his last choices was to put her in charge of both "Everybody" and "The Antipodes." He did not live to see them.) Four years later, she was on Broadway.

Neugebauer's notes to actors often take the form of questions. David Cromer, who played a bluff, sometimes bumbling character in "The Waverly Gallery," recalled "a phrase she used all the time: 'Does that resonate with you?'" He observed, "It gives you permission to respond." Her ability to incorporate unstinting input may be why people frequently talk about how collaborative she is. It may also be how she always creates the sense, which every good director needs to do, that there is plenty of time.

At a rehearsal close to the opening night of "The Ally," Itamar Moses was still making changes to the script. Performing a play about Israel and Palestine written before October 7, 2023, required extreme sensitivity, and time and support were needed to address the emotional cost of taking on the moment's most difficult public conversation. Moses had been altering the ending of the play almost every night of previews, yet Neugebauer behaved as if everything was still an open question. "Can we play something out that might be so ridiculous?" she asked, about a bit of blocking. Or "I don't know if this is right, but I'm having an inclination . . ." She often delivered her comments to actors in very close proximity, in a low murmur. The loudest noise in the room was her knee, which cracked like a gunshot—a real one—every time she squatted down.

Moses later reflected on the fact that Neugebauer's mother, like his, is a therapist. "Maybe there's a way, either instinctively or consciously, in which she makes herself a surface for transference, in the same way that a

"I can give you good news, better news, bad news, worse news, or, the best of all, no news."

"Look at these houses you could afford if the Fed had kept interest rates at 2018 levels."

• •

therapist does," he told me. "By revealing little, but allowing the actors and the characters to merge and reveal themselves." When I asked Rak how she thought her children were affected by being raised in what Neugebauer calls a "mental-health household," she told me, "Lila wrote a poem very young called 'My Mother Has X-Ray Vision.' That sums it up. You know, I think what it did for both of them was they had to develop good boundaries."

Early in our conversations, Neugebauer made me promise that, for every ten questions I asked her, she could ask me two. Jenna Clark Embrey, the dramaturge at Lincoln Center Theatre, who also worked with Neugebauer on many of her Signature plays, said, "If you're telling a bunch of stories you can be, like, 'Oh, no, have we lost time?' With Lila, story time always leads somewhere. She can look at any anecdote, even if it's told off the cuff, and know what to draw from it to apply to what you're doing." I asked Embrey if she could remember any of Neugebauer's own stories. "Oh, Lila does not tell the stories," she said. "It's other people who tell the story."

One winter evening, I went to Heidi Schreck's house in Brooklyn, which has a very handsome back-yard writing shed. She and Neugebauer were reading the latest draft of the "Uncle Vanya" translation to each other. Neugebauer was lying flat on a daybed (she has two herniated disks); Schreck was in a drapey cardigan, curled up on the floor. They met in Louisville in 2008, when Schreck played Mrs. Cratchit in an Actors Theatre production of "A Christmas Carol," and before the pandemic they lived in the same brownstone in Park Slope. Neugebauer had taken over a top-floor one-bedroom apartment from her friend the playwright Annie Baker; their landlords were the playwrights Erin Courtney and Scott Adkins. Schreck knew when Neugebauer was working through a problem, because Neugebauer paces when she thinks. ("I've been told that I have a heavy footfall," Neugebauer allowed.) In 2019, Schreck was profiled by *The New Yorker*—just before "What the Constitution Means to Me" opened on Broadway—and got flustered when the photographer came to set up the shoot. "My apartment was chaos," she said, so she took the photographer up to Neugebauer's pristine space while she wasn't there, and even rooted through her closet for an outfit. In the picture, Schreck poses in a white sundress of Neugebauer's, a painting by Neugebauer's aunt in the background. "I hope I texted you first?" Schreck said now, laughing.

In 2023, André Bishop, the artistic director of Lincoln Center Theatre, invited Neugebauer to direct a major work for the Vivian Beaumont, the organization's immense Broadway stage. After she found out "Our Town" was already spoken for, she started reading Chekhov. "I had the distinct memory of the last time I read this play, which I think had not been for about ten years, and just not getting it," she told me. Reading it this time, she said, "I was stopped in my tracks." She felt as though she were witnessing her own life and the lives of her loved ones inside it. "Some of the psychologies in this play just feel wildly contemporary—and the people, their anguish and their hilarities, I mean, they just are so recognizable," she said. She called Schreck, who had worked as a reporter in St. Petersburg in her twenties. "I've been a Chekhov nerd since I started studying Russian at seventeen . . . but Lila is why I said yes," Schreck said. "I think she shares Chekhov's doctorly talent of looking at humans with both detachment and compassion."

Chekhov, a prolific short-story writer and a doctor whose practice included fighting a cholera epidemic, trained his diagnostician's eye on human behavior—and on himself. He knew very well, for instance, that he had tuberculosis, and that it was killing him. His stunning quartet of theatrical masterpieces obeyed the pressure of his accelerating disease: he started his first great play, "The Seagull," at thirty-five; he published "Vanya" at thirty-seven; he was dead at forty-four. ("You can feel the author's diminishing life floating over the script like a vapor," Hilton Als wrote in this magazine, in 2011.)

"Vanya," with its serial disappointments, is very much a play of middle age. "Like Vanya says, 'I have lived most of

my life.' I'm, like, 'Oh, I have now lived most of *my* life,'" Schreck, who's fifty-two, said. Neugebauer spoke about being at the beginning of middle age. "I'm old enough to know what it feels like to not get what you want," she said. "For the first time, I'm partnered"—she moved in with the musician Kevin Devine last November—"and so I'm living the full scope of my life in a fuller way. My parents are getting older. This is garden-variety shit! But I do feel deeply in touch with the at once hilarious and unbearable tragedy of only getting to move through this mortal plane once." She became more circumspect. "What I'm observing in my parents is their awareness of being in their last chapter. It is a complicated and painful thing to bear witness to."

Schreck and Neugebauer were reading all the parts, alternating back and forth. Schreck said that she recognized a lot of herself in Astrov, the environmentalist doctor. "I don't think I could articulate why, but just the other day I was, like, 'Oh, he does just go . . . on and on,'" she said. I told them I see myself in Vanya, for my hangdog qualities. Then Neugebauer said, "My cheesy reaction would be: I feel like I'm all of them."

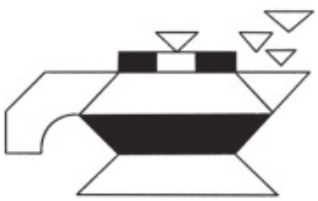
Neugebauer's ability to envision herself in every part had come in handy a few weeks earlier, when she went onstage one night as an actor in "Appropriate," replacing "Succession"'s Natalie Gold, who was out with COVID. You don't often hear of a director playing a lead role on Broadway, big hair-pulling fight included, with a few hours' notice. "Everything about it was banana sandwich," Sarah Paulson told me. Before the show, there had been a whirlwind afternoon rehearsal, during which the cast had directed their director—surely some sort of secret wish fulfillment for actors. "We were all rubbing our hands together like witches at a cauldron," Paulson said, cackling. "Like, 'Lila, why don't you take the pace down a little?'"

Neugebauer seems comfortable stepping into unknown territory. When the mega-producer Scott Rudin—who aided in the transfer of "The Wolves" to Lincoln Center, and produced "The Waverly Gallery"—sent her a screenplay for "Red, White and Water," a short story by Elizabeth Sanders about a veteran with brain damage, she was immediately interested. (At that point, she had directed only one episode of television, for the Duplass brothers' anthology series "Room 104.") She thought that it would be a low-profile film, but the next thing she knew Rudin's office had forwarded a script to Jennifer Lawrence. She and Lawrence met over dinner to discuss it, and the two fell in what Neugebauer calls "creative love."

"Causeway," released by A24 and Apple TV+ in 2022, ebbs and flows between two modes: it's a cool-tempered recovery story about Lynsey (Lawrence), a soldier shipped home to Louisiana from Afghanistan after suffering a brain injury, and a humid hang-out-and-heal film, about Lynsey's new, sometimes confusing friendship with James, a mechanic who's fixing her truck, played by Brian Tyree Henry. Its strongest scenes follow the pair's rambling conversations, conducted along city streets, or in ink-blue back-yard pools.

The shoot, in New Orleans, was challenging. There were flash floods, a hurricane evacuation, a COVID shutdown that led to a two-year gap in production, a producer who disappeared—after Rudin was exposed by a *Hollywood Reporter* story as an abusive employer, he became persona non grata—and more than one heat-induced near-collapse.

"Lila and I have both quit, but we were both chain-smokers at the time," Lawrence told me. "And we shot on a landfill. You weren't allowed to smoke there, and we were in nicotine withdrawal, in two-hundred-degree weather with a hundred per cent humidity." (The



landfill was standing in for Afghanistan.) "One of the heatstroke days was actually my birthday," Lawrence added, a little mournfully. "They brought me a cake covered with cigarettes as the candles." Lawrence's favorite image of her director is Neugebauer "trying to escape a hospital with an I.V. thing hanging out of her arm going, 'I'm fine, I'm fine. Let's all go back to set—I'm fine!'" ("I went to the hospital thinking I could get a quick EKG. . . ." Neugebauer said.)

She credits the production designer Jack Fisk, who was recently nominated for an Oscar for "Killers of the Flower Moon," with giving her an entire film-school education. In turn, she brought her own expertise in devising via improvisation, in the spirit of the Mad Ones. James—the role that got Henry his Oscar nomination—was originally a smaller part. "Lila saw that there was an immediate chemistry between Jennifer and I," Henry told me. "And, because she saw it, her theatre brain was, like, 'Well, let's workshop it.'" Neugebauer's process allowed them to generate script pages based on extemporizations and conversations between her actors. "We poured so much of ourselves into it," Lawrence said. The film got mixed reviews; the military aspects of the story dissolve into vagueness. But, as the plot melts, the intimacy between the performers grows painfully clear.

"That was a life-changing experience," Neugebauer said. "It taught me that I want to make movies for the rest of my life." She is developing a Brian Wilson musical with the playwright David Adjmi, but—though she couldn't yet be specific—her coming year will be "primarily focussed on screen work," she said.

Cutting the samovars and the patronymics is one way to modernize and de-Russify Chekhov, and Schreck has carefully pruned her "Vanya" of its nineteenth-century markers. But the casting of Neugebauer's production, too, brings you into the modern day, often because the actors invite other associations. For instance, William Jackson Harper is playing Astrov. In addition to being a stalwart of the New York stage, Harper played the indecisive moral-philosophy professor Chidi on "The Good Place," which will give his Astrov a certain valence—audiences will overlay their memories of him as the lover who thinks too much, perhaps, or the metaphysicist in Hell.

Steve Carell's comic Everyman Vanya isn't much like his Michael Scott, from "The Office," but we may catch his echo. Neugebauer said that Carell is right for her Vanya because "in his most self-lacerating, self-deprecating, perhaps even self-pitying extremes, he's still someone you'd want to be around. Right? He's still someone whose heart you're rooting for and whose heart could break yours." At

an early cast rehearsal in March, in an unflatteringly lit practice room at Lincoln Center, Carell was a quiet presence. As he and his castmates discussed whether Alfred Molina's character, the tetchy professor Alexander, has rheumatism, Carell made little cracks about his romantic rival. "Maybe Astrov isn't so great a doctor?" he murmured, deadpan. "He keeps losing people on the table—I mean he feels *bad* about it. . . ."

Neugebauer likes to do an enormous amount of research and context-building with her actors. The dramaturge, Embrey, needed to rewrite the Lincoln Center literary department's budget to accommodate her. "This is definitely the most books I've ordered for any production," she said. Neugebauer and Embrey had arranged a Zoom call between Harper and an actual forester, who talked him through what she thinks the woods in New England will look like in several generations. In rehearsal, I observed Molina and Anika Noni Rose, who plays Yelena, as they developed their backstory as a couple. A five-foot-long time line written on brown butcher paper was taped to the wall; during table readings, the collaborators had been trying to chart imagined family events going back fifty years.

"You're not obligated to be thinking about, like, what your character had for breakfast this morning," Neugebauer told me. "But I do think, for this play, coming to some collective understanding of how this particular family arrived at this particular set of circumstances—for us, it's been helpful."

Neugebauer was curious about how Alexander, who is speaking with Molina's own British accent, might have come to America. "This is not to obligate us to have our answers today," she said, rolling up to her actors in a black office chair. "But do you have any back-burner ruminations about their early days?" Molina had been thinking about the U.K.'s "brain drain" of the sixties, when, he said, middle- and working-class men and women found more opportunity in America. The thinking soon turned personal. "I'm only the second person in my family to go to college," Molina said. "I got a fellowship to go to drama school. Maybe he's someone like that?" After a particularly vigorously acted-out anecdote—in which he sang a few bars of "Give My Regards to Broadway"—his Apple Watch beeped in alarm. " 'It looks like you've had a hard fall,' " Molina read, delighted. "It says this kind of thing when you turn seventy."

Neugebauer asked about Alexander and Yelena's early relationship, and Rose described her image of their courtship ("an explosion of attraction and sex"), and wondered if their sex life had changed. "Speaking as a man in his seventies," Molina said, "these things do slow down for all kinds of reasons." The ensuing conversation sounded like a script.

Schreck, nodding: "We've talked about men's shame—there's so much of that."

Neugebauer: "Their fragility—that's what the play is about."

Rose: "Women blame themselves. . . ."

Molina: "Men blame the world."

This play is not like other plays she's made. "I'm bringing my own personal anecdotes into the room for the first time," Neugebauer said. She texted me after a day working with her actors, having discovered with them a further nuance in how Chekhov conveys "how much safer it can feel to leave things unsaid."

It would be facile, of course, to say that theatre is therapy. But, on the other hand, ever since the Greeks invented it, theatre has employed some of therapy's mechanisms at scale. A drama contains thinking and feeling and mitigation at once; Aristotle suggested that a tragedy caused both personal and group catharsis, which would have been, for him, a medical term. "Uncle Vanya" acknowledges that we're all sunk in disappointment or fear or depression. It proposes, delicately, that we focus on others, or on the future, as a remedy. The play's psychological acuity and prescient environmentalism are perhaps why "Vanya" is revived so often. "It feels as though it's written this week," the playwright Simon Stephens, who adapted it into a one-man vehicle for the actor Andrew Scott in 2023, in London, has said.

There has been a flood of smaller "Vanya"s lately—each one seeming warmer and more compact. In 2012, Annie Baker and Sam Gold's colloquial adaptation at the small SoHo Rep theatre was set in a kind of cozy chalet living room; Richard Nelson's production in 2018, with Jay O. Sanders, was played around a kitchen table; and last year's outing directed by Jack Serio squeezed itself into a converted loft. Stephens's London version was so small that it was entirely contained in the single person of Scott, who played all the roles. "I love a tiny 'Vanya,' " Schreck said, during a break in rehearsal. "But what you don't get is that 'two hundred years from now' thing, the *existential*, the sense we are microbes in a universe." One of the first reference images that the show's set designer, Mimi Lien, sent around was Anselm Kiefer's 1997 painting "The Renowned Orders of the Night," in which a man lies either dreaming or dead under an immense starry sky. The expressionistic set for "Vanya"—a photograph of a forest far upstage, gusts of actual rain—has what so many Neugebauer sets have, a sense that we are just stepping out of the circle of safe, human lamplight.

In Chekhov, wry, mundane, sometimes silly conversations make up the tissue of life onstage; hidden behind this veil is the worst thing imaginable—a life lived without noticing it. Neugebauer's superpower is her noticing. Her focus is always riveted, intensely, on you. She notices your expression when she's telling you that, no, you can't come to her house; she notices when you switch from iced coffee to hot. Sometimes, when she's already paying perfect attention, a little tremolo of extra interest will shudder through her, as if she's being recharged. Kenneth Lonergan told me that he loved that she saw the same things he saw in a performance. The set designer Lael Jellinek talked about her brain: "It's going so fast. And she's paying attention to everything." I watched Neugebauer watch Rose and Molina working through a scene, and at one point saw her physically stifle a cry with her fist. I think it was because Rose had placed her head on Molina's shoulder.

In my last few minutes at Lincoln Center, I asked Neugebauer what she had decided about why this Vanya had a gun.

"Our working theory right now is that it might have been Vanya's father's old service weapon," Neugebauer said. I told her that I've seen and read "Vanya" dozens of times, and I've thought about Vanya's dead sister—Sonya's mother—who doesn't appear in the play, but I had never considered Vanya's father.

Oh, sure, Neugebauer was saying, nodding, as she headed into rehearsal again. "I mean, we've talked a lot about the ghosts." ♦

SIGNS YOU SHOULD GIVE UP ON A BOOK

BY JIJI LEE

You can't stop thinking about the characters and how you'd like to rewrite them as characters from books you've actually enjoyed reading.

You find yourself regularly reaching for the book to squash the silverfish in your apartment.

You keep having to reread the first chapter because you've been distracted by an article about Gary Oldman's movies, ranked from best to worst.

You're ten pages into the book and think a murder investigation would really liven things up right about now. (You are reading "Little Women.")

You're twenty minutes into reading the book and just now realize you've been asleep the whole time.

You're twenty years into reading the book and it's the only book that hasn't been burned or rewritten by our robot overlords, and yet you still can't seem to get emotionally invested in the story.

The book has been described as "thrilling" and "captivating," but by readers who play badminton.

You want to stick with the book for the first hundred pages before deciding whether you should abandon it, but at your current pace it will take you a year to get through a single page.

You wait for the book to initiate physical contact.

The blurb on the back of the book says, "Does for sawdust what 'Moby-Dick' did for whales."

You stay up all night, tearing through the pages of the book, only you're not reading the actual words, you're just looking for the page in which you tucked a piece of scrap paper with your Gmail password on it.

You were thinking about Gary Oldman's understated performance in "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy," which leads you to Google whether he was nominated for an Oscar for that film, which then somehow leads you to click on an article about the best hand creams for mature skin, and now you can't remember what the book is about and have to start over from the beginning.

You would rather get into a conversation with your neighbor who likes to go into very specific detail about their meal-prep routine, before they finally ask, "So what's going on with you?," and their eyes glaze over as soon as you start talking and so you end up asking them about which vegetables stay fresh the longest in order to reëngage them in the conversation, just to avoid reading your book.

You are reading "David Copperfield" before starting on "Demon Copperhead," which was inspired by "David Copperfield," because you think this will give you a feeling of accomplishment that will make you feel better about how you've been cold e-mailing recruiters on LinkedIn for the past year without getting any responses, probably because your only viable skill is reading books you can't seem to finish.

There's going to be a film adaptation of the book starring Gary Oldman. You should watch that instead. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

LETTER FROM MONTGOMERY

THE ART OF MEMORY

An ambitious new park attempts to tell the history of slavery through sculpture.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

The site, created by Bryan Stevenson, is a feat of contemporary-art acquisition.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRIS GRAVES

The National Monument to Freedom, in Montgomery, Alabama, is a giant book, standing forty-three feet high and a hundred and fifty feet wide. The book is propped wide open, and engraved on its surface are the names of more than a hundred and twenty thousand Black people, documented in the 1870 census, who were emancipated after the Civil War. On the spine of the book is a credo written for the dead:

> Your children love you.
> The country you built must honor you.
> We acknowledge the tragedy of your enslavement.
> We commit to advancing freedom in your name.

The history of slavery is one of elisions and silences, of moving on. The civil-rights attorney Bryan Stevenson, who designed the monument, has taken a different approach, displaying the realities of enslavement on a monumental scale. His colossal book is the centerpiece of the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park, which opens in late March. Set on a high bluff overlooking the Alabama River, the park presents a painstaking narrative history of slavery, using first-person recollections, historical artifacts, and more than fifty sculptures. The park is the third site in Montgomery created in recent years by Stevenson and his legal nonprofit, the Equal Justice Initiative.

In 2018, E.J.I. opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, dedicated to the victims of lynching, and the Legacy Museum. The memorial, which sits at a high point of downtown Montgomery, towers over the rest of the city, making the state capitol look like a toy in comparison. It consists of more than eight hundred six-foot-long hanging columns, each inscribed with the name of a county, its documented victims, and the dates when they were murdered. At first, the columns are at eye level, but as you walk through the space the ground slopes downward, until the columns are above your head. They are made of Corten steel, which rusts continuously. When it rains, the water runs red on the rusted columns, as if it were blood.

The past decade has seen a surge in public art and educational institutions centered on Black history. The most prominent is the National Museum of African American History and Culture—colloquially known as the Blacksonian—which became a permanent institution in Washington, D.C., in 2016. The museum sticks out on the National Mall: it is a three-tiered glass structure, covered in bronze metalwork that evokes the crowns used in West African art. Much of its significance is in its location—a temple to Black survival, a stone's throw from the country's halls of power. As a government institution, the Blacksonian also lends a kind of penance to a guilty state.

E.J.I. receives no public funding for the Legacy Museum, the lynching memorial, or the sculpture park, which together are known as the Legacy Sites. They are an indictment of Montgomery, a former capital of the domestic slave trade. The sites are angry and mournful: their invocations of peace, justice, and freedom are not banal. The Legacy Museum is a museum in name only. Though it contains some artifacts, such as jars of soil collected from lynching sites, they serve mostly to enhance the main display, which is text. "I am not as interested in object and artifact, mostly because I don't think it has the same narrative power," Stevenson told me. "Or at least you have to provide a narration so it's not easily misinterpreted." Stevenson incorporates video and even holograms into the exhibits, creating a black-box-theatre experience

EVA OERTLI AND BEAT HUBER, "THE CARING HAND"

in order to tell an epic story: the evolution of anti-Black violence in America, from the transatlantic slave trade to Jim Crow terrorism and today's mass-incarceration crisis. The museum is an analogue to the *Times*' 1619 Project, a sweeping public chronicle of an alternative origin story for our country.

The Freedom Monument Sculpture Park is more of a period piece. Like the Legacy Museum, it thwarts our tendency to see slavery from the vantage of the freed. It sticks narrowly to enslavement, concluding with the aftermath of the Civil War. It is also a feat of contemporary-art acquisition, containing works by the likes of Simone Leigh, Hank Willis Thomas, Alison Saar, Charles Gaines, and Nikesha Breeze. The sculptures give the park a straightforward visual appeal; this is the one Legacy Site that you would not hesitate to call beautiful. But, as you attempt to take in the art, an active rail line—originally built by the enslaved to cart in more of the enslaved—makes noise nearby. It can be difficult to tell the difference between the art and the artifacts: an object that from a distance looks like an abstract sculpture reveals itself to be a whipping post, driven into the dirt.

The atmosphere at the park is that of a necropolis. You enter under an arch and encounter a placard that asks for your quiet and your attention. Stevenson has designed a kind of Passion Walk, a circular path through the woods, punctuated by art, artifact, and text. It begins before America began, with a section devoted to Alabama's Indigenous history, followed by a slow anatomization of the transatlantic slave trade and life in enslavement. The path culminates in the National Monument to Freedom, which is grandly literal, impossible to misinterpret. Visitors can use an app to locate their own surnames on the surface, making the monument a living archive.

Walking through the grounds, I thought of the Black philosopher Fred Moten, who, like Stevenson, slips in and out of the art world. Moten once said that he wanted to practice curation not as a bureaucrat but as a curate, a priest who tends to the questions of the lowest in society. Stevenson told me that the goal of the park was to "create a narrative about the history of slavery in a historically authentic space," without any distractions. "And then the idea to mix it with sculpture was to make it a little bit more accessible. The museum has a lot of reading. Even the lynching memorial was kind of abstracted. I said, 'This will be a little easier.' I'm not sure that's true." When the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park opens to visitors, the difficulty will be the point.

History has become mythology in Alabama. Montgomery is a monument to both the civil-rights movement and the Confederacy. Mourners of Martin Luther King, Jr., flock to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, to see the pastor's wooden pulpit. Lovers of Confederate Americana, meanwhile, genuflect at the first White House of the Confederacy. The city is littered with Confederate statues—soldiers, portentous obelisks. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are fifty-eight Confederate monuments across the state. Most of them were erected not in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War but during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, acting as deterrents to burgeoning Black self-determination. The Confederate Memorial Monument—an eighty-eight-foot column outside the capitol, featuring a triumphant goddess—dates from 1898. For much of its life, the monument has been flanked by four large Confederate flags.

I don't think that those of us who would like to see all the stone soldiers fall are conceding much if we admit that most monuments, especially those on street corners or in traffic circles, don't constantly prompt us to think about history. They don't always cause offense. They exist, in their everyday life—to paraphrase Andrew Shanken, a scholar of memorialization—as street furniture. Until hatred or love activates the stone. In 2015, Dylann Roof visited various Confederate monuments in South Carolina before walking into the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Charleston, where he shot and killed nine Black people in cold blood. This spurred a national reckoning over Confederate imagery in public spaces. A week after the shooting, Alabama's governor ordered the removal of the flags surrounding the Confederate Memorial Monument. Many people called for the removal of the monument altogether.

Gerald Allen, a state senator from Tuscaloosa, sponsored the Memorial Preservation Act, which prevents any Alabama monument that's more than forty years old from being relocated, removed, or destroyed. It became law in 2017. Protesters defied it, as did public officials. The mayor of Birmingham, a young Black man named Randall Woodfin, secreted away a Confederate obelisk from Linn Park to an undisclosed location, and gladly accepted the fine—twenty-five thousand dollars—when the state sued Birmingham. In 2019, Montgomery elected its first Black mayor, Steven Reed. He comes from local civil-rights stock—his father participated in lunch-counter sit-ins and has chaired the Alabama Democratic Conference since 1979. While in office, Reed has called for the renaming of high schools and streets for civil-rights heroes.

"History haunts," the scholar Imani Perry has written. "But Alabama changes." Reed and Woodfin are seen as visionaries of the new South—a South where both the government and the monuments reflect the Black constituency. Stevenson, too, is part of this movement. He arrived in Montgomery in the late eighties, then a staff attorney with the Southern Center for Human Rights. At the time, Stevenson's focus was not on Alabama's public-art landscape but on its legal one—namely, the state's death-row system—and he and his colleagues spent decades fighting to reform it. Still, Alabama condemns more people to death than almost any other state. In 1989, Stevenson founded E.J.I., which offers legal representation to anyone on death row. The organization also has a research arm rivalling that of small universities, focussed on documenting the history of racial injustice.

In addition to handling capital cases, Stevenson has argued six times before the Supreme Court, including in a landmark case in 2012 that outlawed mandatory life sentences for juveniles, without parole. In 2014, he published a memoir, "Just Mercy," about his experiences defending the "imprisoned and condemned," as he calls his clients. The book was later adapted into a film, in

which Michael B. Jordan plays Stevenson. Along with the legal scholar Michelle Alexander, Stevenson is arguably the reason why many Americans have at least some understanding of mass incarceration. But now, at the age of sixty-four, he is watching the courts regress. When Stevenson was a child, in rural Delaware, he witnessed lawyers arriving in town to fight segregation. He believes that if Brown v. Board of Education were in front of the Supreme Court today it would not result in the same ruling.

I met with Stevenson at E.J.I. one morning in February. He had come into the office with the sun. Tall, thin, and bald, he has been compared to both a monk and a preacher. A couple of weeks prior, the state had strapped a gas mask on a death-row inmate named Kenneth Smith—Kenny, as he was known to Stevenson, who consulted with Smith's lawyers—and pumped nitrogen gas into his lungs. This method of execution, which causes hypoxia, has not been used by any other state.

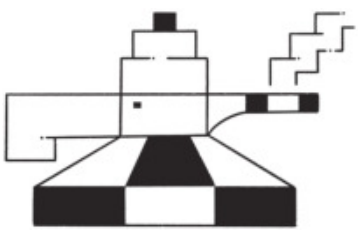
"I realized we have to get outside of the court and start engaging in a narrative struggle that allows our work inside the court to remain effective," Stevenson told me. He started with a street marker. In 2013, he submitted a request to a local historical organization to place an acknowledgment of the city's slave trade on the sidewalk outside the E.J.I. office, a former warehouse for the enslaved. The organization denied the request. Stevenson instead partnered with the city to get the marker placed.

Downtown Montgomery is in the midst of a "revitalization." E.J.I. has fuelled some of the changes, helping to transform areas of the city and attracting throngs of out-of-town visitors. When I landed at the Montgomery airport, the first tourism advertisement I saw was for the Legacy Museum. Several hotels have opened since the first two Legacy Sites were built; it is now difficult to get a restaurant reservation downtown. I saw tourist buses full of groups from churches, Black fraternities, and schools. It is not uncommon to see soldiers at the sites, visiting from the nearby Maxwell Air Force Base.

Most of the people I met in Montgomery praised Stevenson and his revision of the area's antebellum face. But some obstacles remain. As we drove through downtown, Stevenson pointed out several lots that landowners had refused to sell to him or had offered at an obscene markup. There is plenty of abandoned land in Montgomery, and you typically don't need a lot of money to buy it. To get around sellers who might be eager to capitalize on his relative celebrity, Stevenson has created a system of L.L.C.s, allowing E.J.I. to acquire the land needed for its sites under different names. He sometimes sends young white men from his office to scope out potential property.

One night in Montgomery, I went to a restaurant, where I sat at the bar. To my right was a man drinking wine and eating fries. He was a retired prosecutor. He asked me why I was in town, and, when I told him, he placed a swollen, crimson palm on mine. "Sweetie," he said, "I think Bryan is a great salesman." The prosecutor had litigated the cases of many people on death row. He told me that there are monsters in this land and that they do not deserve to walk among us. He did not see the necessity of the Legacy Sites, which he had never visited, because Alabama, he told me, had already dealt with all that.

Stevenson drew inspiration for the Legacy Sites from museums and art exhibitions around the world. He went to Storm King, where he fell in love with Wangechi Mutu's "In Two Canoe," a sculpture of treelike bodies in a boat.



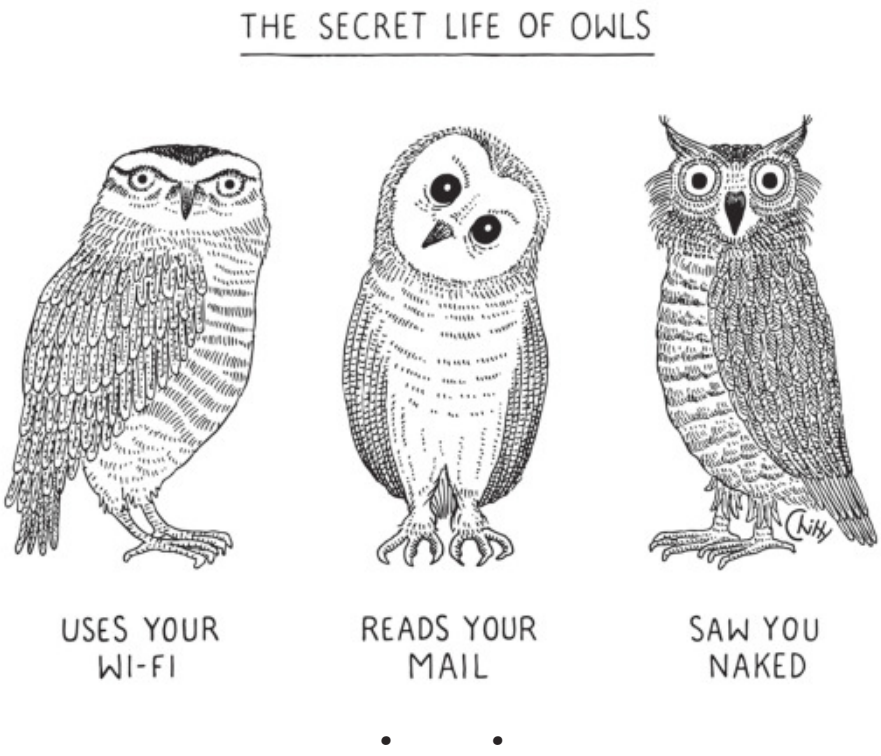
Mutu was born in Kenya and now lives in America; her piece is fantasy and history intertwined, an imaginative reframing of travel across the Atlantic. Stevenson flew to Venice, for the 2022 Biennale, where he encountered Simone Leigh's "Brick House," which has a Black woman's face and a body resembling a vessel or a shelter. The sculpture is imperious and has no eyes. Stevenson told me that the piece reminds him of his late grandmother. On a visit to South Africa, he found himself drawn to the immersiveness of the Apartheid Museum, in Johannesburg: visitors are randomly assigned "white" or "nonwhite" and then enter the museum through the corresponding door. He recalled, of his visit, "The Swedish lawyers who are with me are, like, 'Oh, this feels uncomfortable. We don't want to go through the white door.' The Black woman at the counter replied, 'You are at the Apartheid Museum. You can take that ticket and go through the door, or you can go back to Sweden.'" He also visited the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, in Berlin, which consists of thousands of concrete slabs. The memorial is accompanied by a museum, or a "place of information," which holds the names of Holocaust victims. "There were no words," Stevenson said of the memorial. "They trusted people to come into this relatively abstract cultural space with a knowledge of the Holocaust that allowed them to have a meaningful engagement with the museum below."

After Stevenson surveyed the global range of memorial architecture, he realized that America needed language and story. Art was useful, too, as a handmaiden to the urgent problem of narrative. Even the text-heavy Legacy Museum now has its own art gallery, which serves as a coda, featuring more than a hundred works by artists such as Glenn Ligon and Elizabeth Catlett. Tera DuVernay, the deputy director of museum and memorial operations at E.J.I., told me that she and Stevenson were initially wary of the gallery "overshadowing the existence of the museum." In reality, the gallery completes it. "I go to other museums and I feel like we're in the game now," DuVernay said.

The process of curating the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park was rather informal. Stevenson was already friends with some of the artists, including Hank Willis Thomas, who provided a piece that's on display outside the lynching memorial: "Rise Up," a cement wall with Black men emerging from the top, their arms permanently raised in surrender. Other artists went out of their way to work with him. Alison Saar made a new version of her piece "Tree Souls" that could withstand outdoor in-

stallation. Simone Leigh loaned Stevenson "Brick House."

But before visitors can see "Brick House," set at the entrance of the park, they are meant to experience the other two Legacy Sites. It is overwhelming to visit all three in one day. I started with the Legacy Museum. The crowds can get big, Stevenson told me, so the museum sometimes features the same exhibit twice, allowing everyone to see everything. I visited on a Monday, when the operation is otherwise closed to the public, which made the repetition impossible to escape. I turned to my right, in the slave-pen room, and saw glitching apparition-like holograms of exhausted children, calling for their missing mothers; I turned to my left and out rang "Mama?" again. The lynching memorial, too, employs a sort of doubling: the hanging steel columns are replicated in a separate display outside, flat on the ground. Finally, they have been laid to rest.



At the sculpture park, the bluff has been cleared and trimmed, but only to a point. The scenery is meant to approximate what the land might have looked like to those sold down the river. The long circular path that presents itself to you at the start of the park feels like it was dropped from another realm. Medium-sized sculptures come into view: abstracted female forms, created by the Indigenous artisans Rose B. Simpson and Allan Houser. Signs explain the violence done by colonists to the Indigenous people of Alabama. All around, you hear voices telling family stories in Muscogee, sounds emerging from the brush.

Close by are works by Joe Mutasa and Rayvenn D'Clark, variations on the figurative bust. Mutasa's piece, "African King and Queen," contains photorealistic visages of West African royalty, carved from opal stone. The park presents a sense of lost—and then recovered—Africanness. Back on the path, we are given hard data: information on various human-trafficking ports, and old slavery laws, which E.J.I. has inscribed on plinths.

But one may also leave the narrative, drifting off into the mulch, toward "Benin Strut," by Thaddeus Mosley. Mosley, a ninety-seven-year-old sculptor, works in the naturalist mode. His sculpture, of wooden horns that are curled together, like a pair of arms, mimics the trees around it. The guiding principle of the park is a kind of reclaimed monumentalism, the Black artist taking up space, but Mosley's work does something different. It is the artist behaving furtively, camouflaging himself in the land, denying us full access to his image.

The sculptures range from the conceptual to the literal, and from the figurative to the narrative. Not all of them work in a compositional way. I'm unsure, for instance, about the massive ball and chain, with the cuff cracked open. Some of the pieces are necessarily didactic, commissioned to furnish the script of the path. Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, a Ghanaian artist who has become a sort of house sculptor for E.J.I., told me that he had no issue with being used as Stevenson's vessel: "You get to be a conduit for a vision that is larger than yourself." Visitors will encounter his bronze statues of cotton pickers, their bodies bent over a real cotton field, which the E.J.I. team has installed in the dirt.

One of the park's goals is "immersion," which in other spaces can feel kitschy. Because Stevenson has kept the mood austere, with the focus on education, the park's artifacts feel like more than just momentary portals—they are genuine doors to history. The park features former dwellings of the enslaved, which sit at the heart of the park, accessible via a long approach. The dwellings are not the Big House that you'd find on a plantation, frozen in antebellum glamour. You can walk inside these structures and smell them, see the newspaper used as insulation in the walls. Afterward, you come upon another set of plinths, bearing notices from family members who attempted to reconnect with relatives who had been sold. As you walk around the park, the Alabama River looms. So does the sun, which works with the trees to cast shadows on the National Monument to Freedom, in the final section of the park.

But, before there can be freedom, there must be death. "An Archaeology of Silence," a sculpture by Kehinde Wiley, stretching more than seventeen feet into the air, attacks the clearing with its immensity and its shine. It also attacks the sculptures of horse-riding Confederate soldiers elsewhere in the South. A Black man—a modern one, wearing sneakers—lies on a horse, lifeless. The sculpture was previously in San Francisco, where it was displayed in a cavernous museum hall. It is far more interesting in Alabama. I can no longer imagine it anywhere else. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

TIME'S UP

The Conservatives have ruled Britain for almost fourteen years. What have they done to the country?

BY SAM KNIGHT

My life divides, evenly enough, into three political eras. I was born in 1980, a year after Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street with the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi on her lips: "Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope." The Conservative-run Britain of the eighties was not harmonious. Life beyond the North London square where my family lived often seemed to be in the grip of one confrontation or another. The news was always showing police on horseback. There were strikes, protests, the I.R.A., and George Michael on the radio. My father, who was a lawyer in the City, travelled to Germany to buy a Mercedes and drove it back, elated. Until Thatcher resigned, when I was ten, her steeply back-combed hair and deep, impossible voice played an outsized role in my imagination—a more interesting, more dangerous version of the Queen.

I was nearly seventeen when the Tories finally lost power, to Tony Blair and "New Labour," an updated, market-friendly version of the Party. Before he moved to Downing Street, Blair lived in Islington, the gentrifying borough I was from. Boris Johnson, an amusing right-wing columnist, who was getting his start on television, also lived nearby. Our local Member of Parliament was an out-of-touch leftist named Jeremy Corbyn.

New Labour believed in the responsibility of the state to look after its citizens, and in capitalism to make them prosper. Blair was convincing, even when he was wrong. He won three general elections in ten years and walked out of the House of Commons to a standing ovation, undefeated in his eyes. I was turning thirty when Labour eventually ran out of road, undone by the Iraq War, the global financial crisis, and the grim temper of Gordon Brown, Blair's successor. He was caught in a hot-mike moment describing an ordinary voter, who was complaining about taxes and immigration, as a bigot.

Since then, it's been the Conservatives again. In 2010, the Party returned to government in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Since 2015, it has held power alone. Last May, the Tories surpassed the thirteen years and nine days that New Labour had held office. But the third political era of my lifetime has been nothing like the previous two. There has been no dominant figure or overt political project, no Thatcherism, no Blairism. Instead, there has been a quickening, lowering churn: five Prime Ministers, three general elections, two financial emergencies, a once-in-a-century constitutional crisis, and an atmosphere of tired, almost constant drama.

The period is bisected by the United Kingdom's decision, in 2016, to leave the European Union, a Conservative fantasy, or nightmare, depending on whom you talk to. Brexit catalyzed some of the worst tendencies in British politics—its superficiality, nostalgia, and love of game play—and exhausted the country's political class, leaving it ill prepared for the pandemic and the twin economic shocks of the war in Ukraine and the forty-nine-day experimental premiership of Liz Truss. Covering British politics during this period has been like trying to remember, and explain, a very convoluted and ultimately boring dream. If you really concentrate, you can recall a lot of the details, but that doesn't lead you closer to any meaning.

Last year, I started interviewing Conservatives to try to make sense of these years. "One always starts with disclaimers now—I didn't start this car crash," Julian Glover, a former speechwriter for David Cameron, the longest-serving Prime Minister of the period, told me. I spoke to M.P.s and former Cabinet ministers; political advisers who helped to make major decisions; and civil servants, local-government officials, and frontline workers hundreds of miles from London who had to deal with the consequences.

Some people insisted that the past decade and a half of British politics resists satisfying explanation. The only way to think about it is as a psychodrama enacted, for the most part, by a small group of middle-aged men who went to élite private schools, studied at the University of Oxford, and have been climbing and chucking one another off the ladder of British public life—the *cursus honorum*, as Johnson once called it—ever since. The Conservative Party, whose history goes back some three hundred and fifty years, aids this theory by not having anything as vulgar as an ideology. "They're not on a mission to do X, Y, or Z," as a former senior adviser explained. "You win and you govern because we are better at it, right?"

Another way to think about these years is to consider them in psychological, or theoretical, terms. In "Heroic Failure," the Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole explains Brexit by describing Britain's fall from imperial nation to "occupied colony" of the E.U., and the rise of a powerful English nationalism as a result. Last year, Abby Innes, a scholar at the London School of Economics, published "Late Soviet Britain: Why Materialist Utopias Fail," which argues that, since Thatcher, Britain's political mainstream has become as devoted to particular ideas about running the state—a default commitment to competition, markets, and forms of privatization—as Brezhnev's U.S.S.R. ever was. "The resulting regime," Innes writes, "has proved anything but stable."

These observations are surely right, but I worry that they obscure two basic truths about Britain's experience since 2010. The first is that the country has suffered grievously. These have been years of loss and waste. The U.K. has yet to recover from the financial crisis that began in 2008. According to one

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

Rishi Sunak, Britain's fifth Conservative Prime Minister since 2010, faces almost certain defeat in an election later this year.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JAVIER JAÉN

estimate, the average worker is now fourteen thousand pounds worse off per year than if earnings had continued to rise at pre-crisis rates—it is the worst period for wage growth since the Napoleonic Wars. "Nobody who's alive and working in the British economy today has ever seen anything like this," Torsten Bell, the chief executive of the Resolution Foundation, which published the analysis, told the BBC last year. "This is what failure looks like."

High levels of employment and immigration, coupled with the enduring dynamism of London, mask a national reality of low pay, precarious jobs, and chronic underinvestment. The trains are late. The traffic is bad. The housing market is a joke. "The core problem is easy to observe, but it's tough to live with," Mark Carney, the former governor of the Bank of England, told me. "It's just not that productive an economy anymore."

With stagnant wages, people's living standards have fallen. In 2008, Brown's Labour government commissioned Michael Marmot, a renowned epidemiologist, to come up with ways to reduce England's health inequalities. Marmot made suggestions in six policy areas, including better access to child care, walking and cycling programs, social-security reforms, and measures to improve people's sense of agency at work. In 2010, he presented his ideas to the incoming Conservative-led coalition, which accepted his findings. "I thought, Wow, this is great. . . . I was pretty bullish about the whole thing," Marmot told me. "The problem was they then didn't do it."

Ten years later, Marmot led a follow-up study, in which he documented stalling life expectancy, particularly among women in England's poorest communities—and widening inequalities. "For men and women everywhere the time spent in poor health is increasing," he wrote. "This is shocking." According to Marmot, the U.K.'s health performance since 2010, which includes rising infant mortality, slowing growth in children, and the return of rickets, makes it an outlier among comparable European nations. "The damage to the nation's health need not have happened," Marmot concluded in 2020. He told me, "It was a political choice."

And that is the second, all too obvious, fact of British life throughout this period: a single party has been responsible. You cannot say that the country has been ruled against its will. Since 2010, the Tories have emerged as the winner of the popular vote and as the largest party in Parliament in three elections. In December, 2019, Boris Johnson won an eighty-seat majority in the House of Commons, the Conservatives' biggest electoral success since the heyday of Thatcherism.

How is this possible? The opposition has been underwhelming. For years, Labour drifted and squabbled under two unconvincing leaders: Ed Miliband and Corbyn, my old Islington M.P. It is telling that, since Labour elected Keir Starmer, an unimaginative former prosecutor with a rigidly centrist program, the Party is competitive again. But the Conservatives have not survived by default. Their party has excelled at diminishing Britain's political landscape and shrinking the sense of what is possible. It has governed and skirmished, never settling for long. "It's all about constantly drawing dividing lines," a former Party strategist told me. "That's all you need. It's not about big ideological debates or policies or anything." In many ways, the two momentous decisions of this period—what came to be known as austerity and Brexit—are now widely accepted as events that happened, rather than as choices that were made. Starmer's Labour Party does not seek to reverse them.

If you live in an old country, it can be easy to succumb to a narrative of decline. The state withers. The charlatans take over. You give up on progress, to some extent, and simply pray that this particular chapter of British nonsense will come to an end. It will. Rishi Sunak, the fifth, and presumably final, Conservative Prime Minister of the era, faces an election later this year, which he will almost certainly lose. But Britain cannot move on from the Tories without properly facing up to the harm that they have caused.

The Conservative Party manifesto for the 2010 election was a plain blue hardback book titled "Invitation to Join the British Government." After the Party's longest spell out of power in more than a century, its pitch to voters was "the Big Society," a call for civic volunteering and private enterprise after

the statism of Labour. "There was a feeling that it must be possible to be positive about a better future in a way that wasn't socialist," Glover, the former speechwriter, said. "And that wasn't an ignoble thing to try."

Beginning in 2005, Cameron and George Osborne, the shadow Chancellor, had modernized the Tories. The duo represented a new generation of Conservatives: deft and urbane, easy in their privilege. Osborne was the heir to a baronetcy; Cameron's family descended from a mistress of William IV. Cameron embraced centrist causes, including the environment and prison reform. There was talk of a "post-bureaucratic age." But the main aim was simpler. "Above all, it was trying to win," Osborne told me recently.

In the spring of 2009, Cameron told a gathering of Party members in Gloucestershire, "The age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age of austerity." The speech was part of a successful campaign to associate Labour's public spending with the global financial crash, to which Britain had been badly exposed. "The word 'austerity' was deliberately introduced into the lexicon by myself and David Cameron," Osborne said. "Austerity" evoked the country's sober rebuilding after the Second World War. "The word didn't have the connotations then that it does now," Osborne recalled. "It was, you know, a bit like prudence."

In 2010, the Conservatives fell short of a majority in the House of Commons and formed, with the Liberal Democrats, Britain's first coalition government in almost seventy years. The state was running a deficit of a hundred and fifty-seven billion pounds—about one and a half times the budget of the National Health Service. Any incoming administration would have had to find ways to balance the books, but, under Cameron and Osborne's leadership, austerity was a moral as well as an economic mission. "We allowed it to become the defining thing," the former senior adviser reflected.

"Austerity" is now a contested term. Plenty of Conservatives question whether it really happened. So it is worth being clear: between 2010 and 2019, British public spending fell from about forty-one per cent of G.D.P. to thirty-five per cent. The Office of Budget Responsibility, the equivalent of the American Congressional Budget Office, describes what came to be known as Plan A as "one of the biggest deficit reduction programmes seen in any advanced economy since World War II." Governments across Europe pursued fiscal consolidation, but the British version was distinct for its emphasis on shrinking the state rather than raising taxes.

Like the choice of the word itself, austerity was politically calculated. Huge areas of public spending—on the N.H.S. and education—were nominally maintained. Pensions and international aid became more generous, to show that British compassion was not dead. But protecting some parts of the state meant sacrificing the rest: the courts, the prisons, police budgets, wildlife departments, rural buses, care for the elderly, youth programs, road maintenance, public health, the diplomatic corps.

Plan A spooked economists because of the risk to economic growth. But, in 2013, the British economy grew by 1.8 per cent. The government claimed victory. Around that time, Osborne declared that the nation could win "the global race" and become the richest major economy in the world by 2030. "We were in complete command of the political landscape," he recalled. "The U.K. is the country that is seen to have got its act together after the crash. London has become the kind of global capital. So it has worked—there's a bit of a dénouement coming—but it had worked." At the general election in 2015, the Conservatives won a majority in the House of Commons, with proposals to make a further thirty-seven billion pounds' worth of cuts.

"It was devastatingly politically effective," Osborne told me, of austerity. It's just that the effects were so horrendous. Between 2010 and 2018, funding for police forces in England fell by up to a quarter. Officers stopped investigating burglaries. Only four per cent now end in prosecution. In 2021, the median time between a rape offense and the completion of a trial reached more than two and a half years. Last fall, hundreds of school buildings had to be closed for emergency repairs, because the country's school-construction budget had been cut by forty-six per cent between 2009 and 2022.

In October, I talked with Tony Durcan, a retired local-government employee who was responsible for libraries and other cultural programs in the city of Newcastle during the twenty-tens. Durcan told me that he'd had "a good war," all things considered. There were moments, he said, when the sheer extremity of the crisis was exciting. Between 2010 and 2020, central-government funding for local authorities fell by forty per cent. At one point, it looked as if sixteen of Newcastle's eighteen libraries would close. The city's parks budget was cut by ninety-one per cent. The situation forced some creative reforms: Newcastle City Library now hosts the Citizens Advice bureau, where residents can apply for benefits and seek other forms of financial guidance. (The library is featured in "I, Daniel Blake," Ken Loach's anti-austerity film of 2016.) But other parts of the city government fell apart. "Youth services and a lot of community-support services, they just disappeared completely," Durcan said. Child poverty rose sharply. (About forty per cent of children in Newcastle currently live below the poverty line.) But after a while Durcan and his colleagues stopped talking about the cuts, even though their budgets continued to fall. "There was a view—was it helpful? Were you risking losing confidence in the city?"

Over time, Durcan came to question the official reasoning for the savings. "You can make a mistake, even when you're acting for the best," he explained. "I don't think that's what happened in austerity." Newcastle was a Labour stronghold, as was the rest of the northeast. Until 2019, the Tories held only three out of twenty-nine parliamentary seats in the region. A similar pattern was repeated across England. Poorer communities, particularly in urban areas, which tended to vote Labour, suffered disproportionately.

In Liverpool, where the Conservatives have not won a Parliamentary seat for forty years, spending, per head, fell more than in any other city in the

country. Public-health spending in Blackpool, one of the poorest local authorities in England, was cut almost five times more, per person, than in the affluent county of Surrey, just south of London, whose eleven M.P.s are all Tories. Durcan and his colleagues noted the discrepancies between Labour- and Conservative-supporting regions. "And so there was cynicism," he said, "and also great disappointment, a sense of injustice."

Osborne denies that austerity was ever targeted in this way. "It's not like we ministers just sit there and go, We're not going to cut Kensington Council. We're going to cut Liverpool Council. That is a lampoonish way of thinking about British politics," he said. But some of his colleagues were more willing to acknowledge that electoral thinking was at play. One former Cabinet minister conceded that there were "big strategic moves" to favor older voters, who were more likely to vote Conservative, in the form of pension increases and interventions to raise property prices. David Gauke, a Treasury minister from 2010 to 2017, agreed that the parts of the country that had benefitted most under Labour had seen their budgets cut under the Conservatives. "There was a rebalancing that went on," he said. "Did it go too far? Maybe it did."

What was less forgivable, in the end, was the cuts' unthinking nature, their lack of reason. In the fall of 2013, a staffer named Giles Wilkes, who worked for a senior Liberal Democrat minister in the coalition, became alarmed by projections that showed ever-reducing government budgets. "I don't wish to paint the picture of the British state as too chaotic and heedless and amateur. But I was wandering around in 2013 and 2014, saying to people, Does anyone know what this means for the Home Office or the court system, for local authorities and the social-care budget?" Wilkes said. "Nobody was *curious*." Wilkes is now a fellow at the Institute for Government, a nonpartisan think tank. "It was very obvious in real time," he told me. "There wasn't a central function going, Hold on a mo. Have we made sure that we can provide a decent prison estate, a decent sort of police system?"

And so stupid things happened. Since 2010, forty-three per cent of the courts in England and Wales have closed. No one thinks that this was a good idea. For years, the Conservatives cut prison funding and staffing while encouraging longer jail times. "You kind of had a mismatch," Gauke, who later served as the Justice Secretary, admitted. The number of adults sentenced to more than ten years in prison more than doubled—until the system caved in, overrun by violence, self-harm, drug use, and staff shortages. In 2023, the government activated what it called Operation Safeguard, in which hundreds of jail cells in police stations were requisitioned to hold convicted offenders, because the prisons were full. In September, a terrorism suspect escaped from Wandsworth Prison, in South London, by clinging to the underside of a food-delivery truck. Eighty of the prison's two hundred and five officers had not shown up for work that day.

The long-term effects of austerity are still playing out. A 2019 paper by Thiemo Fetzer, an economist at the University of Warwick, asked, "Did Austerity Cause Brexit?" Fetzer found that, beginning in 2010, the parts of the country most affected by welfare cuts were more likely to support Nigel Farage's U.K. Independence Party, which campaigned against immigration and the E.U. The withdrawal of the social safety net in communities already negatively hit by globalization exacerbated the sense of a nation going awry. Public-health experts, including Marmot, argue that a decade of frozen health-care spending undermined the country's response to

the pandemic. More broadly, austerity has contributed to an atmosphere of fatalism, an aversion to thinking about the future. "It is a mood," Johnna Montgomerie, a professor at the University of British Columbia who studies debt and inequality, has written. "A depression, a chronic case of financial melancholia."

Since leaving politics, in 2017, Osborne has enjoyed a lucrative career, serving simultaneously as an adviser at BlackRock, the asset-management firm, and as the editor of the *Evening Standard* newspaper; more recently, he has been a partner at an investment bank and a podcaster. He insists that the cuts, ultimately, enabled the U.K.'s public finances to withstand the pandemic and the energy crisis that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "There's no counterfactual," he told me. Osborne likes to accuse his critics of living in a parallel reality, in which the financial crisis and Britain's deficit never existed: "It's, like, Apart from the assassination, Mrs. Lincoln, did you enjoy the play?"

But that does not mean the Tories made good choices. British social-security payments are at their lowest levels, relative to wages, in half a century. Under a steady downward ratchet, started by Osborne and continued by his successors, household payments have been capped and income thresholds effectively lowered. In 2017, a "two child" limit was placed on benefits for poor families. In November, 2018, Philip Alston, the U.N.'s special rapporteur on extreme poverty, toured the U.K. When we spoke, he recalled a strong sense of denial, or ignorance, among British politicians about the consequences of their decisions. "There was a disconnect between the world and what senior ministers wanted to believe," he said.

The fall in Britain's living standards isn't easy for anyone to talk about, least of all Conservatives. The Resolution Foundation, which studies the lives of people with low and middle incomes, is chaired by David Willetts, a former minister in Cameron's government. Willetts is a tall, genial man, who worked for Margaret Thatcher's policy unit in the eighties. His nickname in the Party was Two Brains. "What I say to Tories now is, Look, we are *behind* for various reasons," Willetts said, carefully. "You can argue about it. But our household incomes are clearly lower than France or Germany or the Netherlands." Part of the problem, Willetts explained, was that Britain's richest twenty per cent had largely been spared the effects of the past fourteen years—and that made it genuinely difficult for them to comprehend the damage. "We are all O.K.," he said. "The burden of adjustment has almost entirely been borne by the less affluent half of the British population."

In late November, I took a train to Worcester, a cathedral city south of Birmingham, on the River Severn. It was a raw, washed-out morning. Floodwater shone in the meadows. The city is famous as the home of Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce—a dark, sweet yet sour, almost indescribably English condiment, first sold by a pair of chemists in 1837—which has been doused on two centuries' worth of shepherd's pie and other stodgy lunches. Worcester used to be a den of political corruption: in 1906, men willing to sell their votes to the Tories could collect payment in the rest rooms of the Duke of York, a pub in the middle of town. More recently, it has been a bellwether. In the nineties, Conservative strategists described "Worcester Woman," a median female voter—politically aware, married, with two children. (Since 1979, the city's M.P.s have belonged to the party in power.) I was on my way to Citizens Advice Worcester—part of a charitable network that offers free counselling on debt relief and legal matters—behind a restored Victorian hotel.

Shakira was playing on the radio in the reception and a sign read "If You Are Frightened of Your Partner, Call Us." Geraint Thomas, a Welsh lawyer who runs the center, was in his office, worrying about a heating bill. A few years ago, it was some four thousand pounds a year, but after recent price hikes it was now about fourteen thousand. In 2017, the charity had started running services in Herefordshire as well. Now funding was tight, and various COVID emergency funds were coming to an end. "Next year, we have got a bit of a hole," Thomas said. The clock on his wall had stopped.

Since 2019, the number of people seeking help at the center had risen by thirty per cent. Two years of high inflation and rising interest rates meant that the caseworkers were now seeing homeowners and people working two jobs, along with the unemployed and families on benefits. "It's like a black hole, dragging more and more people in," Colin Stuart, who manages volunteers, said. Anne Limbert, who oversees the advice team, explained that, until a few years ago, it was usually possible to make a recovery plan for clients. "It used to be that we could help people, you know, and make a difference," she said. "Now it's just kind of depressing." Increasingly, Limbert was sending clients to food banks.

The caseworkers said that they had mostly tuned out politics. Gwen Fraser, a volunteer manager in Herefordshire, which has some of England's most deprived rural communities, had met a visiting M.P. a few months earlier. "I thought, You're not in the real world, mate," she said. Not long ago, a seventy-seven-year-old man, behind on his mortgage, had told Fraser that he was suicidal. The proportion of people coming to the center with a long-term health condition had risen by twenty per cent since 2019. (N.H.S. prescriptions for antidepressants in England almost doubled between 2011 and 2023.) Fraser had recently settled on a phrase that she found useful in her paperwork: "Overwhelming distress."

Worcester Woman voted for Brexit. In 2016, the city chose to leave the European Union by a margin of fifty-four per cent to forty-six per cent. The perception of the Brexit vote as a cry of anguish from deindustrialized northern towns or from faded seaside resorts isn't wrong—it just leaves out the rest of England. Two weeks after the referendum, Danny Dorling, a geography professor at the University of Oxford, published an article in the *British Medical Journal* showing that Leave voters weren't defined neatly either by geography or by income. Fifty-nine per cent identified as middle class, and most lived in the South. "People wouldn't believe me for years," Dorling told me. "This was *Hampshire* voted to leave."

Dorling's politics are on the left. He opposed Brexit and often describes Britain as a failing state. During the summer of 2018, Dorling gave dozens of public talks across the country reflecting on the referendum. He noticed that places that had voted Remain invariably had better rail connections than those that voted Leave. A lot of Brexit supporters were older and economically secure but had a keen sense of the country going downhill. "Something was falling apart," Dorling said. "They had got a house in their twenties. They'd had full employment. Their children were in their forties and they might be renting. . . . It was an almost entirely unselfish vote by the old for their grandchildren—let's try it, or let's at least show we're angry."

How you interpret the Brexit vote informs, to a great extent, how you make sense of the past fourteen years of British politics. It is not just a watershed—a before and after. It is also a prism that clarifies or scrambles the picture entirely. One perspective sees the whole saga as a woeful mistake. In this view, Cameron decided to settle, once and for all, an internal Tory argument about Britain's place in an integrating E.U., a question that had haunted the Party since the last days of Thatcher. In the process, he turned what was an abstruse obsession on the right wing of British politics into a much simpler, terrifyingly binary choice for the population on how they felt their life was going.

In the accident theory of Brexit, leaving the E.U. has turned out to be a puncture rather than a catastrophe: a falloff in trade; a return of forgotten bureaucracy with our near neighbors; an exodus of financial jobs from London; a

misalignment in the world. "There is a sort of problem for the British state, including Labour as well as all these Tory governments since 2016, which is that they are having to live a lie," as Osborne, who voted Remain, said. "It's a bit like tractor-production figures in the Soviet Union. You have to sort of pretend that this thing is working, and everyone in the system knows it isn't."

The other view sees Brexit as an unfinished revolution. Regardless of its origins, the vote in 2016 was a repudiation of how Britain had been governed for a generation or more. In the *B.M.J.* article, Dorling observed that younger voters—who chose overwhelmingly to remain in the E.U.—were angry with their elders. "They will feel newly betrayed . . . but their real betrayal has been a long time in the making," he wrote. For a highly centralized country that is smaller than Wyoming, the U.K. is lopsided beyond belief. It contains regional inequalities greater than those between the east and the west of Germany, or the north and the south of Italy—inequalities that have been allowed by successive governments to grow to shameful extremes. On average, people in Nottingham earn about a quarter of what people make in Kensington and Chelsea, in West London, which is some two hours away by train.

During the Brexit campaign, the E.U. came to represent not just a supranational monolith across the English Channel but profound distances within the U.K. itself. And the politicians who defended the E.U. looked and sounded, for the most part, as if they spent more time in Tuscany each summer than they had spent on Teesside in their lives. "The kind of globalism, the internationalism, the liberal élite view, was seized on by people who thought that they'd been spoken down to for decades," John Hayes, a Tory M.P. and a Brexiteer, told me. "And the more they wheeled out the establishment figures, the more it was, Yeah, that's them. Those are the ones who don't get it. They don't understand us."

Almost eight years after the vote, what stays with me is how *unimagined* Brexit was. Overnight, and against the will of its leaders, the country abandoned its economic model—as the Anglo-Saxon gateway to the world's largest trading bloc—and replaced it with nothing at all. "I can't think of another occasion when a party has so radically changed direction while in office," Willetts said. Thatcher was an architect of the E.U.'s single market, which in time became a heresy.

You can marvel at the recklessness of Brexiteers such as Farage, or of Johnson, who spearheaded the Vote Leave campaign. ("He is not a Brexiteer," Osborne said. "I really would go to my grave saying, deep down, Boris Johnson did not want to leave the E.U.") But the real dereliction ran deeper. Sensible Britain failed. The Civil Service did not plan for Brexit. Ivan Rogers was the U.K.'s permanent representative to the E.U. from 2013 to 2017. He started warning about the likelihood of Brexit about five years before the vote. "It was difficult to get the attention of the system," he said. Beyond a briefing paper, demanded by the House of Lords, there was only some

TO YOU

I know grief and you may know it too,
but I have reached the age where it
is perpetual—I didn't know it would be
like this so I'm telling you, who still have
a whole lifetime to forget your grief the way
I forgot Angie, who wore too much eye
makeup, whose skirts were too short for
a seventh grader or so the Girls V.P. said, who
did not come to school one Monday, having
died over the weekend of spinal meningitis
and disappeared from the life she would
have lived while I forgot her as I lived
those years she never had though now she
comes back often looking ahead of her time
in her black skirts and torn fishnets. And
now, when I do not have my whole lifetime
ahead of me, the phone rings and another
has suddenly passed and she is as young
as when I first knew her before her daughter
was murdered and she took her grief
and fought for gun control and became
a counsellor and wrote a play in which time
collapsed and her daughter starred alongside
her—and if you think her having done
all of that and more makes her death any less
sudden it does not which is what makes grief
perpetual amid our ongoing die-off. Yet
I am still here, and this morning I do have
more to tell you—just hours ago the sun filtered
down to the forest floor finding wet leaves
and fir needles and no blackberry vines
because my dog and I had left the trail, she
with her four good legs and I with my one
good one, walking and sliding where only
the deer had passed before us. Or how forty
years ago Bill and I walked every day through
the streets of Florence toward the attic we
had rented in Bellosguardo carrying our
dinner past Santa Maria del Carmine
where inside Masaccio's man and woman fled
Paradise forever trying to hide their terrible

shame. We could go in anytime we wanted
and drop the lire into the slot bringing light
into the medieval darkness and look upon their
misery, their sorrow, as if they might instruct us
on what or what not to do as we stumbled
through the rest of our lives where now I
remember and return to them because I do
believe memory is a dwelling as singular as
any place we've ever lived though in L.A.
the tract where I grew up is a long-term
parking lot for LAX and the hill where my
grandparents' house stood among the oil wells
is a city park—which is all to say that some
of the places you live now may be erased
or resurrected like that park, planted as it is
with native plants, because, of course, it's still
your choice, the way it was ours who failed at
doing so much of what we said we'd do, failing
you as history has failed all of us. But maybe
you'll never find what you are looking for,
meaning you'll keep looking as I was
the other night when I heard the cry of a
female great horned owl and looked up as
she hooted and flew from treetop to treetop
at dusk, and then I did not think of you. I
watched her fly. And finally as for what is
coming there are always signs—just think of
the photo of my parents, divorced early in the
Second World War, on the day they remarried,
she with her wrists bandaged from working
a punch press, he with his hands bandaged
from shrapnel that lodged in his body for
the rest of his life. In the photo, these two people
who are still strangers to me look almost hopeful,
but nothing good will come of it unless I count
my own life, born as I was some years later
of their second-chance union, which took place
as if upon an irradiated funeral pyre the day
after we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima
about which they surely must have known.

—Maxine Scates

"confidential thinking," in the words of Jeremy Heywood, the former head of the Civil Service. (Heywood died in 2018.) "The mandarins have a lot to answer for on this," Rogers said. "We were very badly prepared in 2016."

"I didn't think it was very wise," Carney, the former governor of the Bank of England, said, of the official refusal to consider the referendum going wrong. "We did a ton of planning." After the vote, the Bank stabilized the markets while British politics imploded. Cameron resigned and was replaced by Theresa May, a former Home Secretary with limited experience of the economy or of international affairs. In the second half of 2016, May worked with a small group of advisers to formulate a Brexit strategy that ultimately satisfied nobody. "It was incredibly poor statecraft," a former Cabinet colleague said. "Absolute shit. Abominable." The abiding image of the Brexit talks was a photo of Michel Barnier, the E.U.'s chief negotiator, with his colleagues and their neat piles of paper on one side of a table, while their British counterparts, led by David Davis, a bluff former special-forces reservist, sat on the other side with a single notebook among them.

One Friday lunchtime, a couple of months ago, I met Dominic Cummings at a pub not far from his house in London. A light snow was in the air. Cummings, who is fifty-two, worked on education policy in the coalition government before becoming the campaign director of Vote Leave. (He coined its notorious slogan, "Take Back Control.") Cummings is a Savonarola figure in British politics, an ascetic and a technocrat, who wants to save the state by burning it down. He refers to Elon Musk by his first name and writes Substack essays with titles such as "On Complexity, 'fog and moonlight,' prediction, and politics VII: why social science is so bad at prediction & what is to be done."

Cummings reveres the Apollo space program and takes a dim view of almost all Britain's elected officials. "Where they are not malicious they are moronic," he told me once. He talks rapidly, with a slight Northern rasp. (He is from Durham, near Newcastle.) Next to our table in the pub, a woodstove emitted a sudden, enveloping cloud of smoke, which dissipated while we talked. Cummings appeared to be wearing two hats, against the cold. He apologized if it seemed as if he were staring at me. He had recently undergone retinal surgery.

Cummings, unsurprisingly, saw Brexit in revolutionary terms—as a chance to break with the country's ruling orthodoxy. "The Vote Leave campaign was not of the Tory Party," he said. "It was not a conservative—big 'C' or little 'c'—effort. But none of them wanted to confront the reasons why we did it in the first place. . . . For us, this was an attempt to wrench us off the Cameron, establishment, Blairite line." Cummings believes that Britain must rediscover its ability to build things—roads, railways, houses, research institutes, products that people want to buy—in order to prosper again. He argues that it is America's ecosystem of universities, entrepreneurs, and government procurement departments that have helped maintain its economic and

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS POLICE LINE
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POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS POLICE LINE
SHEEN

"Careful. The killers always return to the scene of the crime."

• •

technological edge, not just lower taxes or a freer form of capitalism. "When you start talking about this to Tories, they go, Oh, Dominic, you sound like a terrible central planner," Cummings said. "And you go, That's America. This is not weird left-wing shit."

No one would accuse Cummings of having a popular platform. His jam is A.I. and Nietzsche. But, after the Brexit vote, he kept waiting for May's government to act on what was, to him, its obvious implications: to restrict immigration, reform the state, and explore dramatic economic policies, in order to diverge from the E.U. and to boost the country's productivity. "I kept thinking, month after month, God, like, it's weird the way they are just thrashing around and not facing it," Cummings said. In his view, the election of Trump, that November, provided a perfect excuse for Remainers not to take the Brexit vote seriously. "They just lumped it all in with, Oh, it's a global tide of populism. It's mad, irrational, evil. It's partly funded by Putin," he said. "They didn't have to reëvaluate and go, Maybe the establishment in general has been, like, fucking up for twenty-plus years."

In July, 2019, May resigned as Prime Minister and was replaced by Johnson, who hired Cummings as a senior adviser. Cummings thought that Johnson would probably screw it up. At the same time, he saw an opportunity to advance what he considered the true Vote Leave agenda. "In some sense," he said, "the risk was worth taking."

That fall was the most kinetic, breathtaking period of Britain's fourteen years of Tory rule. With Cummings at his side, along with Lee Cain, another former Vote Leave official, who became his director of communications, Johnson broke the deadlock that had existed since the referendum. He asked the Queen to prorogue, or suspend, Parliament. He expelled twenty-one Conservative M.P.s—including eight former Cabinet ministers and Nicholas Soames, the grandson of Winston Churchill—for attempting to stop the country from leaving the E.U. with no deal at all.

On a Tuesday in late September, the Supreme Court ruled that Johnson's suspension of Parliament had been unlawful. "The effect upon the fundamentals of our democracy was extreme," the Justices found. I stood outside the court in the rain, and it felt as though the thousand-year-old timbers of the state were moving beneath our feet. Someone in the crowd was wearing a prison jumpsuit and an enlarged Johnson head. A woman was dressed as a suffragist. Anna Soubry, a former Tory M.P. who quit the party to fight for a second referendum, shook her head in wonder. "Astonishing," she said. But Johnson prevailed. Before the year was out, he had cobbled together a new, hard-line Brexit deal and thumped Corbyn at a general election on another three-word Cummings-approved slogan: "Get Brexit Done."

Johnson was, briefly, unassailable. In the election that December, the Conservatives won seats in places such as Bishop Auckland, in Cummings's home county of Durham, which they had not held for more than a hundred years. The Party gathered a new, loose coalition of pro-Brexit voters—many of whom were from formerly Labour-voting English towns—to go with its traditionally older, fiscally conservative base. Johnson's celebrity (the hair, the mess, the faux Churchillian vibes, the ridiculous Latin) was the glue that held it all together. He sensed the public mood. (With Johnson, that was not the same as doing something about it.) He disavowed austerity—promising more money for the N.H.S., new hospitals, and more police—and described a mighty program to redress the country's economic imbalances, which he called Levelling Up.

Johnson's premiership collapsed under the pressure of the pandemic and of his own proclivities. According to Cummings, the alignment between the goals of Vote Leave and Johnson's ambitions as Prime Minister decoupled in January, 2020, just a few weeks after the election. Cummings wanted to overhaul the civil service and Britain's planning laws. Johnson, for his part, wanted a rest. "He was, like, What the fuck are you talking about? Why would I want to do that?" Cummings recalled. (Johnson did not reply to a request for comment.) "It's basically cake-ism, right?," Cummings said, referring to Johnson's political lodestar: having his cake and eating it, too. "I want to do all the things you want to do, and I want everyone to love me," Cummings recalled. "I was, like, Yeah, that's not happening."

Britain's first cases of the coronavirus were announced on January 31, 2020, the day the country left the European Union. In March, Johnson ordered the first national lockdown, caught COVID, and later spent three nights in the I.C.U. For months, the country staggered from one set of restrictions to the next—a reflection of Johnson's inconstant attitude toward the virus. In texts, Cummings used a shopping-cart emoji to indicate the Prime Minister veering

from one half-formed idea to the next. Levelling Up became a pork-barrel exercise: of seven hundred and twenty-five million pounds earmarked in June, 2021, about eighty per cent was for Conservative constituencies.

Johnson's Downing Street was operatically dysfunctional. A rift opened between Cummings and his team and a faction centered on Carrie Symonds, Johnson's then fiancée, a former Conservative Party communications director. In November, 2020, Cummings accused the Prime Minister of betraying the Vote Leave program and resigned. "I said, Listen, we had a deal. And if you end up breaking our deal there is going to be hell to pay," Cummings recalled. Cain left as well. A little more than a year later, the *Daily Mirror*, a left-wing tabloid, broke the news that Johnson and his staff had organized parties while the rest of the country was under lockdown—beginning with the party for Cain's departure, the previous November. Johnson resigned six months later.

The pandemic bore out truths about the British state. There were bright spots: the vaccines and their rollout by the N.H.S.; the intervention of the Treasury, under Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor, whose furlough plan protected millions of jobs. More generally, though, the virus revealed tired public services, a population in poor health, and a government that was less competent than it thought it was. "It's very convenient for everyone to blame Boris," Cummings said. "But the truth is, in January, February, of 2020, it was the civil service saying, We're the best-prepared country in the world. We're brilliant at pandemics. The reality is, everything was crumbling."

In October, 2023, Cummings testified at the U.K.'s COVID inquiry, an investigation of the government's handling of the pandemic led by a retired judge. His written evidence was a hundred and fifteen pages long and began with an epigraph from "War and Peace": "Nothing was ready for the war which everybody expected."

The hearings took place in an office building around the corner from Paddington Station. I sat next to a row of bereaved family members, who were holding photographs of their loved ones. Cummings wore a white linen shirt, which came untucked, a tweed jacket with elbow patches, and black boots. He is such a contentious figure—an agent of these disordered times—that people often don't really listen to what he says. A great deal of the media coverage of Cummings's testimony focussed on his texting style. In messages during the pandemic, he referred to ministers as "useless fuckpigs," "morons," and "cunts." The inquiry's lawyer asked Cummings if he thought his language had been too strong. "I would say, if anything, it understated the position," he replied.

In written testimony, Cummings implored the COVID inquiry to address a wider crisis in Britain's political class. "Our political parties and the civil service are extremely closed institutions with little place for people who can think and build," he wrote. Cummings believes that the war in Iraq, the financial crisis, the pandemic, and the invasion of Ukraine all, in their ways, exposed serious shortcomings in the British state that have yet to be addressed.

Brexit, too. When we met, Cummings observed that the country has still failed to confront the full implications of the vote, either domestically or abroad: "You can just treat it as, like, a *weird* thing, like a witch trial in a medieval village. Now the witch has been burnt, and now the community is getting back to normal. Or you can think of it as part of big structural changes in Western politics, society, and the economy. And if the establishment thinks that you can treat it like a sort of episode of witchcraft mania, then they're just going to walk straight into recurring shocks."

I was at Heathrow Airport, refreshing the BBC's Web site on my phone, when the screen changed to a black-and-white commemorative portrait of the Queen. On February 6, 1952, when Elizabeth's father, George VI, died, the Prime Minister was Winston Churchill. "We cannot at this moment do more than record a spontaneous expression of our grief," he told the House of Commons that afternoon. Seventy years later, in September, 2022, Britain was seized again by deference, tenderness, and other, more inchoate, emotions. You could not escape the ritual. Hats, horses, artillery in London's parks. In her later years, the Queen's aura of permanence had been enhanced by the recklessness at work in other parts of Britain's public life. Her survival helped to contain a sense of crisis.

The Queen died on Liz Truss's second full day in office. When the country's brand-new Prime Minister and her husband, Hugh O'Leary, arrived at Westminster Abbey for the state funeral, Australian television identified them as "maybe minor royals." Four days later, Truss launched the Growth Plan 2022, a Thatcher-inspired, forty-five-billion-pound package of tax cuts intended to reignite the British economy. The bond markets didn't like it. The pound fell to a record low against the dollar. The International Monetary Fund asked Truss to "re-evaluate." Her approval rating dropped by almost thirty points in a week. Ashen, Truss fired her Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, then left office herself, on October 25th, serving seventy-one days fewer than Britain's previous shortest-serving Prime Minister, George Canning, who died suddenly of pneumonia in 1827.

It made sense to pretend that Truss and her Growth Plan had been a rogue mission, inflicted on an unsuspecting nation. Truss was depicted as mad, or ideologically unreliable, or both. She had been a Liberal Democrat at Oxford who once opposed the monarchy. She was strangely besotted with mental arithmetic. But the truth is that Truss was neither an outlier nor a secret radical, but a representative spirit of the Conservative Party and its years in power. She was one of the first M.P.s of her intake to be promoted to the Cabinet, brought on by Cameron, before serving both May and Johnson in a hectic and haphazard series of important jobs: running departments for the environment, justice, international trade, and a large part of the Treasury.

In all these positions, Truss was the same: spiky, dynamic, considered skillful on TV. In 2012, she and Kwarteng contributed to "Britannia Unchained," an ode to tax cutting and deregulation that described the British as "among the worst idlers in the world." I asked one of Truss's contemporaries, the former Cabinet minister, if anyone took the ideas seriously at the time. It was hard to catch the attention of the Party's base under the coalition, he complained. "The

easiest way was to show a bit of leg," he said. "It used to be hanging." Truss campaigned for Remain before becoming a Brexiteer. As Foreign Secretary, she posed on top of a tank—pure Thatcher cosplay—and dominated the government's Flickr account, with pictures of herself jogging across the Brooklyn Bridge and standing, ruminatively, in Red Square, in Moscow.

"It's silliness," Rory Stewart told me. Stewart became a Conservative M.P. on the same day as Truss, in 2010, after working for the British government in Iraq, running an N.G.O. in Afghanistan, and teaching at Harvard. He was ejected from the Party during the Johnson purge of 2019. Last year, he published "How Not to Be a Politician," a compulsive, depressing memoir of his career during this period. "It's clever, silly people. It's a lack of seriousness," he said, of Truss and many of his peers.

In 2015, Stewart was sent to work under Truss at Britain's department for the environment. Truss challenged him to come up with a strategy for England's national parks in three days. "She said, Come on, Rory, how difficult can this be?" he recalled. Truss started firing off suggestions. "Get young people into nature. Blah blah blah blah." (The plan was announced on time; Truss declined to speak to me.) "I felt with Liz Truss slight affection but above all profound pity," Stewart said. "Because she's approaching these big conversations as though she's sort of performing as an underprepared undergraduate at a seminar."

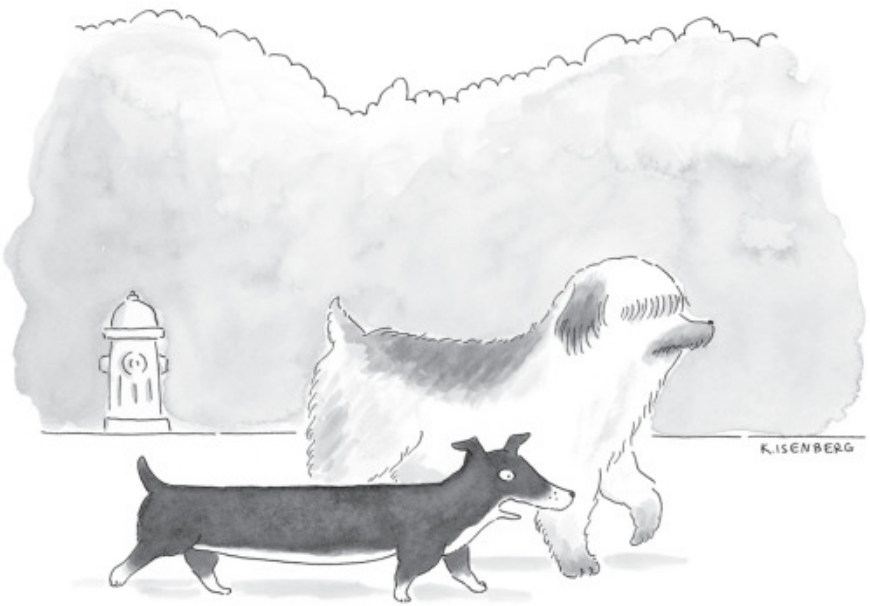
On a cloudless summer's morning, in the dog days of Theresa May's government, I travelled to Scunthorpe, in North Lincolnshire. In the sixties, Scunthorpe was a growing steel town with four blast furnaces named after English queens. In 2016, the population voted overwhelmingly for Brexit; three years later, the steelworks was at risk of closure, in part because of trade uncertainties caused by the vote. British Steel, which ran the plant, had been sold to private-equity investors for a pound. Four thousand jobs were on the line.

In the afternoon, I sat down with Simon Green, the deputy chief executive of the local council. Green was in his early fifties, angular and forthright. He grew up in Grimsby, a fishing town on the coast, and spent his career in local government—in Boston and New York, as well as in Nottingham and Sheffield—before taking the job in North Lincolnshire, in 2017. Green was sick of reporters, like me, coming up to Scunthorpe from London for the day, to gawk at its predicament and wonder why people could have believed that Brexit would improve their situation. "No disrespect, but we do get a level of poverty porn," he said. "A lot of doom and gloom."

Green assured me that the Brexit-related anxiety around the steelworks was a blip. "We're actually on a bit of a comeback roll," he said. He was excited about the region's potential for green technology and the construction of HS2, a new Y-shaped high-speed railway that was going to transform connections between London and cities in the northeast and the northwest. "Rail track, ballast, concrete, cement—you name anything to do with trains, infrastructure, it's an engineering, Midlands, Northern thing," he said. Green ascribed the Brexit vote in Scunthorpe to "values and culture" rather than to economics—a sense of dislocation and of feeling disdained by politicians in London.

Recently, I wondered how Green was getting on. In 2019, Scunthorpe was part of the "Red Wall" of Labour constituencies that flipped for the Tories. British Steel had changed hands once more. Now Chinese investors were planning to install new furnaces, which required fewer workers and were fed with scrap metal. For the first time since 1890, the plant would no longer produce virgin steel from ore. I met Green a couple of weeks before Christmas. He had left his job a few days before. He seemed relieved to be done. Seven local authorities in England have gone bust since 2020, including the one serving Birmingham, Britain's second-largest city. In North Lincolnshire, the council now spends about three-quarters of its budget on services for vulnerable children and adults—roughly double the proportion of a decade ago. "We're still here," Green said, ruefully. The saga of the steelworks continued. "It's endless," he went on. "Is it closing? Isn't it closing?" Britain has had eleven different economic programs in the past thirteen years.

We were in a teaching room at the University Campus North Lincolnshire, which opened a few years ago in the former local-authority offices. The old council chamber, built in the shape of a blast furnace, was now a lecture hall. The average student age was twenty-nine. Green was proud of the project. It reminded him of mechanics' institutes in the nineteenth century. "People



"I thought I could make a career of being elongated. Now I feel like I should go to law school."

are using their own judgment to better themselves," he said. "If you want a job in this area, you can get a job. We need more quality opportunity." Green had had a clear strategy for Scunthorpe and the nearby Humber estuary, built around green technology and education. "I asked a question to my colleagues and politicians as well," he said. "What sort of town do you want this to be in ten, fifteen, twenty years?"

Britain has no equivalent strategy for itself. In September, Sunak weakened several of the country's key climate-change targets. A few weeks later, he cancelled what was left of HS2, the new rail network. Only the stem of the Y will now be built, from London to Birmingham, at a cost of some four hundred and seventy million pounds *per mile*, with little or no benefit to the North. "I can get quite excited, agitated by that," Green said. "It makes us look a laughingstock." Green was studiously apolitical when we talked. I had no sense of which way he voted. But he despaired of the shallowness and contingency now at the heart of British politics, and the lack of narrative coherence—or shared purpose—about what these years of struggle had been intended to achieve. I asked if he ever worried that the country was in a permanent state of decline. "I think, at the moment, we are at the crossroads," he replied.

When will it end? Sunak says that he will call a general election in the second half of the year. The gossip in Westminster says that probably that means mid-November: a British encore, to follow the main event in the U.S. But it could come as soon as May. The Prime Minister began preparing the ground last fall, after his first year in office, by presenting himself as a change candidate—a big claim, considering the circumstances.

In October, I went to Manchester to watch Sunak address the Conservative Party's annual conference. He was introduced onstage by his wife, Akshata Murty, the daughter of N. R. Narayana Murthy, a founder of Infosys, the Indian I.T. conglomerate. (According to the London *Sunday Times*, Sunak and Murty have an estimated net worth of about five hundred million pounds.) Murty wore an orange pants suit, and she addressed Britain's most successful political organization as if it were a local gardening society. "Please know that Rishi is working hard," she said. "He shares your values and he knows how much you care about the future of the U.K."

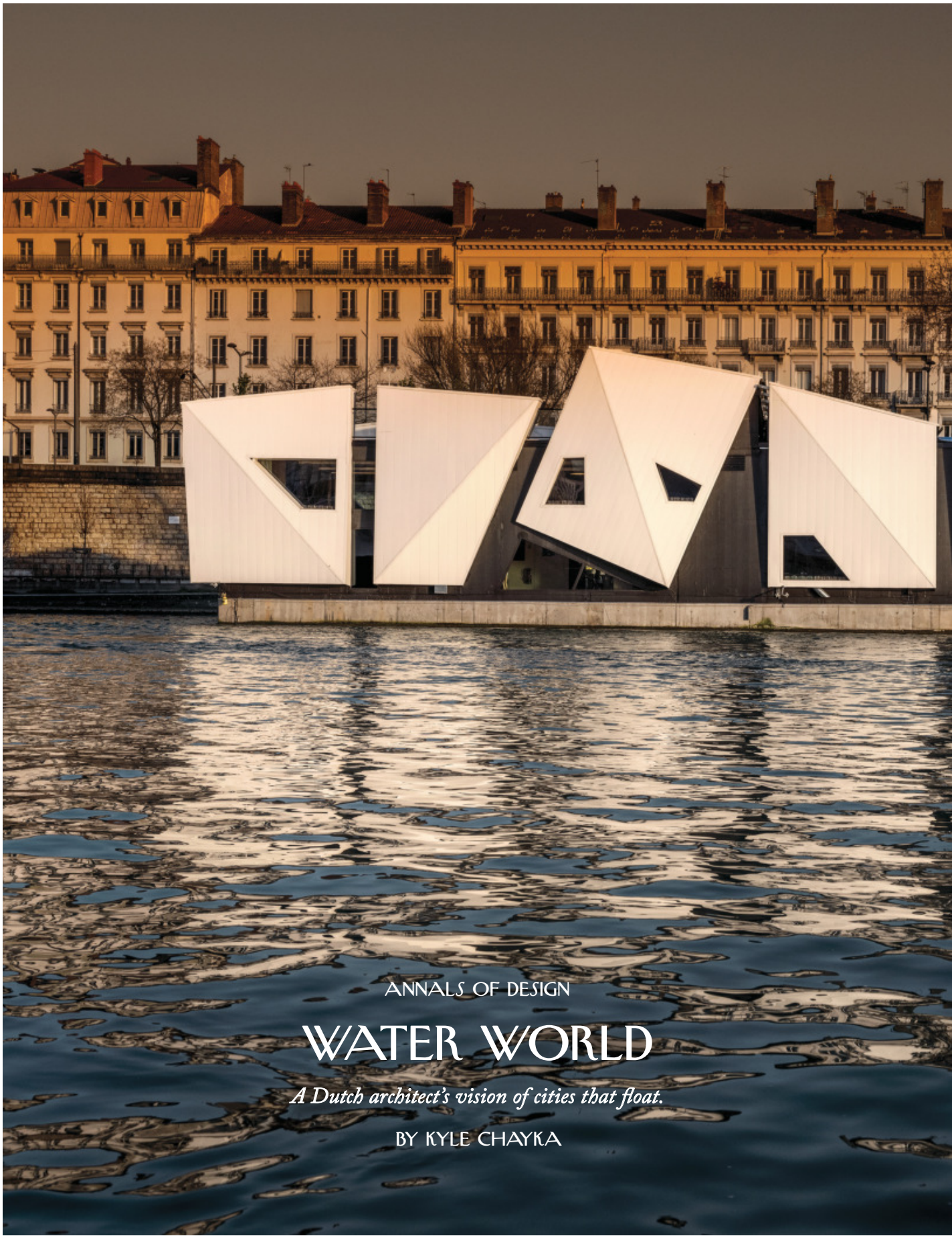
Sunak has a quietly imploring tone. British politics was in a bad way, he explained. People were fed up. "It isn't anger," Sunak said. "It's an exhaustion with politics, in particular politicians saying things and then nothing ever changing." Sunak dated the rot back thirty years without explaining why, but, presumably, to indicate the fall of Thatcher. (Thatcher was everywhere in Manchester; she is the modern Party's only ghost.) Having positioned himself as the country's next, truly transformative, leader, Sunak offered his party a weirdly pallid program: the dismantling of HS2, plus two long-range, complex policies, to abolish smoking and to reform the A-levels—England's standard end-of-school exams. "We will be bold. We will be radical," Sunak promised. "We will face resistance and we will meet it."

Increasingly, Sunak has been pulled between the Party's diverging instincts: to retreat to the dry, liberal competence of the Cameron-Osborne regime or to head off in a more explicitly protectionist, anti-immigrant, anti-woke direction. In Manchester, the energy was unmistakably on the Party's right. Suella Braverman, then the Home Secretary, magnetized delegates with a speech warning of a "hurricane" of mass migration. Truss staged a growth rally, and Nigel Farage cruised the conference hall, posing for selfies. (There is talk of Farage standing as a Conservative M.P.) Back in London, I had lunch with David Frost, an influential Conservative peer. "Rishi, I feel for him, in a way," Frost said. "He's just trying to keep the show on the road and not upset all these different wings of the Party. But the consequence of that is you end up with a sort of agenda which is not politically meaningful at all."

On January 14th, a poll of fourteen thousand people, which Frost facilitated, suggested that the Party is on course for a huge defeat later this year. The question is what kind of haunted political realm it will leave behind. Under Starmer, Labour has been tactical in the extreme, exorcising Corbyn's left-wing policies (Corbyn has been blocked from standing for the Party at the election), while making vague noises about everything else. It has nothing new to say about Brexit and equivocates about its own tax and spending plans, if it wins power. The Party recently scaled back a plan to invest twenty-eight billion pounds a year in green projects. There is no rescue on the way for Britain's welfare state.

Osborne noted all this with satisfaction. "The underlying economic arguments have basically been accepted," he said, of austerity. "It's rather like the Thatcher period. Everyone complained that Thatcher did deindustrialization, and yet no one wants to unpick it." By contrast, Cummings sees the two cautious, hedging leaders in charge of Britain's main political parties—and the relief among some centrists that the candidates are not so different from each other—in rather darker terms. "They are deluded when they think it's great that Sunak and Starmer are in. It's just like they're arguing over trivia," he said. "The politics of it are insane."

I am afraid that I agree. It is unnerving to be heading into an election year in Britain with the political conversation so small, next to questions that can feel immeasurable. I put this to Hayes, the Tory M.P., when I went to see him in the House of Commons. "You're arguing we have very vanilla-flavor politics, in a richly colored world. There's something in that," he said. Then he surprised me. "I think the key thing for the Conservatives now is to be *more* conservative," he said. We were sitting in a bay window, overlooking the Thames. A waiter poured tea. Hayes seemed to relish the coming election. It was as if, after almost fourteen years of tortuous experiment, real conservatism might finally be at hand. "Outside metropolitan Britain and the university towns, it's all up for grabs," Hayes assured me. "Toryism must have its day again." ♦



ANNALS OF DESIGN

WATER WORLD

A Dutch architect's vision of cities that float.

BY KYLE CHAYKA

Koen Olthuis, the founder of the architectural firm Waterstudio, believes that floating buildings like the Théâtre L'Île Ô, in Lyon,

will transform urban living like skyscrapers did a century ago.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GIULIO DI STURCO

In a corner of the Rijksmuseum hangs a seventeenth-century cityscape by the Dutch Golden Age painter Gerrit Berckheyde, "View of the Golden Bend in the Herengracht," which depicts the construction of Baroque mansions along one of Amsterdam's main canals. Handsome double-wide brick buildings line the Herengracht's banks, their corniced façades reflected on the water's surface. Interspersed among the new homes are spaces, like gaps in a young child's smile, where vacant lots have yet to be developed.

For the Dutch architect Koen Olthuis, the painting serves as a reminder that much of his country has been built on top of the water. The Netherlands (whose name means "low countries") lies in a delta where three major rivers—the Rhine, the Meuse, and the Scheldt—meet the open expanse of the North Sea. More than a quarter of the country sits below sea level. Over hundreds of years, the Dutch have struggled to manage their sodden patchwork of land. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the country's windmills were used to pump water out of the ground using the hydraulic mechanism known as Archimedes' screw. Parcels of land were buffered with raised walls and continuously drained, creating areas, which the Dutch call "polders," that were dry enough to accommodate farming or development. The grand town houses along Amsterdam's canals, as emblematic of the city as Haussmann's architecture is of Paris, were constructed on thousands of wooden stilts driven into unstable mud. As Olthuis told me recently, "The Netherlands is a complete fake, artificial machine." The threat of water overtaking the land is so endemic to the Dutch national psyche that it has inspired a mythological predator, the Waterwolf. In a 1641 poem that coined the name, the Dutch poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel exhorted the "mill wings" of the wind pumps to "shut down this animal."

Olthuis has spent more than two decades seeking ways to coexist with the wolf. His architectural firm, Waterstudio, specializes in homes that float, but its constructions have little in common with the wooden houseboats that have long lined Dutch canals. Traditional houseboats were often converted freight ships; narrow, low-slung, and lacking proper

"This next one's a sad little number I call 'I Left My Guitar on the F Train.'"

• •

plumbing, they earned a reputation in the postwar period as bohemian, sometimes seedy dwellings. (Utrecht's one-time red-light district was a row of forty-three houseboat brothels.) Waterstudio's signature projects, which Olthuis prefers to call "water houses," look more like modern condominiums, with glassy façades, full-height ceilings, and multiple stories. In the past decade, as severe weather brought on by climate change has caused catastrophic flooding everywhere from Tamil Nadu to New England, demand for Waterstudio's architecture has grown. The firm is currently working on floating pod hotels in Panama and Thailand; six-story floating apartment buildings in Scandinavia; a floating forest in the Persian Gulf, as part of a strategy to combat heat and humidity; and, in its most ambitious undertaking to date, a floating "city" in the Maldives.

One evening in January, I met Olthuis for dinner at Sea Palace, a Chinese restaurant in a three-story pagoda built on a boat hull in the harbor near the center of Amsterdam. Created based on a similar structure in Hong Kong, it has seating for some nine hundred people and bills itself as the largest floating restaurant in Europe. On its opening night, in 1984, the boat began to sink, and more than a hundred diners had to evacuate; the builders' calculations hadn't accounted for the fact that Hong Kongers weigh less on average than the Dutch. In the end, the surplus crowd was served dinner al fresco on the shore, and, the story goes, a Dutch tradition of Chinese takeout was born.

Olthuis is fifty-two years old and gangly, with a stubbled chin and graying hair swept back in the shaggy style typical of Dutch men. He dresses in all black year-round, even, to his wife's chagrin, packing black trousers for summer vacation. But his vibe is less severe aesthete than restless inventor. He drives a plug-in hybrid car that he never bothers to charge, eats instant ramen every morning for breakfast, and had an entire floor of the home he designed for his family, in Delft, carpeted in Astro-Turf, so that his three sons can play soccer indoors. During our dinner, he drank two Coke Zeros, which augmented his already considerable aura of activity and churning thought. Midway through the meal, he picked up his chopsticks and held one upright in each fist, to illustrate the poles that tether many of Waterstudio's buildings to the beds of the bodies of water they float on.

He put down one chopstick and picked up a bowl of kung-pao chicken, which represented the concrete foundations that, somewhat counterintuitively, allow many of his houses to float. "Concrete weighs 2.4 times more than water, so if you make a block of concrete it will immediately sink," he explained in lightly accented English. "But if you spread it out, if you make a box filled with air, then it starts to float." The poles are anchored sixteen feet into the water bed and extend several feet above the surface; the floating concrete foundation is fastened to the poles with rings. Olthuis slid the bowl slowly up and down the length of the chopstick to demonstrate how the foundation can rise and fall along the poles with the fluctuations of the water. Whereas Sea Palace is essentially a glorified barge, resting atop the water on pontoons, Waterstudio's concrete bases give its projects a stability approximating that of land-bound construction, at least when the waters beneath are still. "You can't compare them," Olthuis said of his buildings versus the one we were sitting in.

He peered through the restaurant's windows at the bustling commercial strip onshore. "This area would be fantastic to place maybe a series of floating apartment buildings and affordable housing for students," he said.

The Dutch government's approach to water management is primarily defensive. New pumping stations are being built to keep pace with the higher volumes of water brought on by climate change. A program to raise seawalls has been funded through 2050. But Harold van Waveren, the top expert on flood-risk management at Rijkswaterstaat, the agency that oversees the country's larger canals, dams, and seawalls, told me that the threats posed by water have become increasingly unpredictable as the sea level rises and storm surges grow more extreme. "We just finished a study that says at least three metres, even five metres, shouldn't be a problem in our country," he said, referring to projected surges. "On the other hand, will it stop at three metres? You never know."

Olthuis believes that the Netherlands should give certain flood-prone parts of the land back to the water—a managed surrender to the elements rather than a Sisyphean battle against them. He held up the dish of chicken, now representing one of the country's polders. The

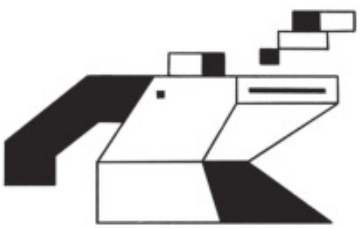
polders, numbering more than three thousand, are like a series of bowls, he said. For centuries, the Dutch have made their land habitable by laboriously keeping the bowls dry. But habitability does not have to depend on dryness, Olthuis argues; on the contrary, building on water can be safer and sturdier than building on reclaimed ground. "I think some bowls should be full," he said, suggesting that flooding the land would amount to little more than a natural evolution of a man-made system, not unlike the way skyscrapers transformed cities a century ago. "It's just an update to the machine."

Living on the water is an old form of ingenuity, one that has often been driven by necessity. Half a millennium ago, in what is now Peru, the indigenous Uros people used thatches of reeds to build floating islets in Lake Titicaca, likely as a safe haven from Incan encroachment. Around thirteen hundred people live on the islands to this day. Tonlé Sap, a lake in Cambodia, is home to thousands of people from the country's persecuted Vietnamese minority, who are forbidden to own property on land. Their fishing villages, adapted to the lake's dramatic seasonal ebbs and flows, include floating barns, floating karaoke bars, and floating medical clinics. Olthuis has long been interested in what he calls "wet slums," urban waterfront areas where rudimentary wooden dwellings are often built on stilts, as in the sprawling neighborhood of Makoko, in Lagos. "What you see is poor people adapting to the situation," he told me. "If they can't find land, then they find a way to build on water. Those people are innovators."

Olthuis likes to say that Waterstudio creates "products, not projects." The firm's goal is not to build dazzlingly unique structures but, instead, to standardize and modernize floating construction with designs that can be replicated en masse. One of Olthuis's favorite projects to date was also the least expensive: a prototype of a floating home made from "bamboo and cow shit" in a flood-prone area in Bihar, one of India's poorest states. The building had steel frames for durability, a layout that accommodated multiple families, and an onboard stable to house farm animals in times of flooding. Such simple structures are part of Olthuis's concept of City Apps—"on-demand, instant solutions" that can float into neighborhoods to add resources such as classrooms, medical clinics, and energy facilities. He envisions persuading cities around the world to install hundreds of thousands of floating affordable-housing units to help alleviate overcrowding and gentrification. "It's a lifetime of trying to connect the dots toward that future," he said.

So far, though, most Waterstudio buildings are smaller-scale luxury products, amounting to what Olthuis called "innovation at the cost of the rich." One morning, I visited a floating home that Waterstudio built on the Rhine near the city of Leiden, about twenty miles from Amsterdam. Behind a tall, vine-covered fence was a garden with a brick pathway leading to a two-story, two-thousand-square-foot home with floor-to-ceiling windows and a long balcony. One of more than two hundred floating houses that Waterstudio has completed throughout the Netherlands, it was commissioned, in 2021, by Erick van Mastrigt, a seventy-one-year-old retired Dutch financial executive, as a home for him and his wife.

Van Mastrigt met me at the front door, dressed in a leisurely ensemble of a quarter-zip sweater and espadrilles. "If you asked me ten years ago, 'Me on a houseboat?' No, I don't think so. I never had a plan like that," he said. Van Mastrigt and his wife had previously lived across the street, in a traditional home



with a Dutch gabled roof, a filigreed façade, and a thousand-square-foot garden. In 2016, they bought a houseboat on the river for their adult son to stay in when he was visiting. But then the son moved to Thailand. Tired of maintaining their large house and its landscaping, the couple decided to downsize. The old houseboat was too small, but its site presented a possibility. They found Waterstudio online; the house cost about 1.5 million euros to complete, a figure that Olthuis estimates is ten or fifteen per cent higher than the cost of building a similar structure on land. The couple moved in last year and recently sold their previous home.

In the house's vestibule, van Mastrigt flipped a switch to open a hatch in the floor, revealing a low-ceilinged storage area, cluttered with luggage, built into the hollow of the concrete foundation. On the main floor, an open kitchen abutted a double-height dining room. Along one side of the building was a space, like an aquatic driveway, which in warm months houses the couple's motorboat. I looked up and noticed, above the dining table, a crystal chandelier mounted on a long, thick metal pillar, made slightly less obtrusive with a coat of the same dusky-pink paint that covered the ceiling. If the chandelier dangled only by a chain, van Mastrigt explained, it would swing with the slightest movement of the water.

The chandelier was just one example of a conspicuous incongruity between the building's high-tech functionalism and the couple's taste in décor. Down a hallway was a living room furnished with leather armchairs and paintings of traditional Dutch interiors in gilded frames. "Many of the things we still have here were from the old house," Mastrigt explained. (They even keep a photo of the house on the bedroom wall.) A tiny elevator connected to the second floor. From the upstairs balcony, the view across the river was drably industrial: a metal-sided boat-rental warehouse, stacks of multicolored shipping pallets, an auto-repair shop. Next door was an old, uninhabited houseboat. Like any optimistic gentrifier, van Mastrigt chose to see the merits of his undeveloped surroundings. "You don't have direct neighbors," he said. "You can make a lot of noise."

Olthuis's career is a union of his matrilineal and patrilineal family trades. In Dutch, Olthuis means "old house"; on his father's side, architecture and engineering have been practiced for five generations. In The Hague, tile mosaics on the façades of several Art Nouveau buildings bear the name of the architect who designed them: Jan Olthuis, Koen's great-great-grandfather. On his mother's side, the family name is Boot, Dutch for "boat." Olthuis's maternal grandfather, Jacobus, was the third in a line of Boots

to run a shipyard in the village of Woubrugge. A tinkering streak runs in the family: in the nineteen-fifties, Jacobus, who also had a pilot's license, added ice runners and an airplane wing to a boat and "sailed" the contraption over frozen ponds. I asked Olthuis how his parents met, and he seemed surprised to recall that even this detail of his personal history had an element of aquatic destiny: it was on a cruise around Italy.

Still, Olthuis's path to building on water was fairly circuitous. The Netherlands is known for industrial design, and Olthuis's home town, Son, lies outside Eindhoven, the industry's hub. Olthuis's father worked for Philips, the electronics company, in television engineering, at the time when black-and-white sets were being replaced by color ones. Olthuis recalls a period when the family would receive a new experimental TV model every month, including one with a teletext printer that could spit out sports scores and other onscreen information on a receipt-like scroll. As a child, during stays with his grandparents, Olthuis would spend hours in Jacobus's home workshop, building model boats, cars, and helicopters. When he was thirteen, he began helping a friend who repaired motorbikes, which they rode up and down country roads before they were old enough to legally drive. He worked for a time at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Eindhoven, washing dishes and parking cars, and considered a career in hospitality. But, when his girlfriend at the time decided to study architecture at the Delft University of Technology, he followed her there and enrolled in the same program.

Olthuis's student days, in the early nineties, coincided with the rise of "starchitects," global builder-celebrities who imprinted their projects with dramatic aesthetic signatures. Rem Koolhaas, a fellow-Dutchman who founded the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, had become known for his conceptual rigor and his audaciously cantilevered designs, including the wave-shaped Nexus World Housing, in Fukuoka, and the Maison à Bordeaux, a private residence in France equipped with a giant elevator platform to carry its wheelchair-bound owner between floors. Olthuis told me that he found the starchitectural approach unappealingly ego-driven. "They're more focussed on building a statue for themselves than for society," he said. During a university conference, though, he found himself serving as a chauffeur for the famous Polish American architect Daniel Libeskind, and the two formed a connection. Libeskind made Olthuis a sketch that he's kept to this day, of a windmill in a landscape that they'd driven through. (A fan of numerology, Libeskind also calculated that Olthuis's career would peak in 2031. "I've still got some time left," Olthuis joked to me.) Olthuis admired Libeskind's spirit of experimentation, and the sense of social meaning with which he imbued projects such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin. "He taught me that architecture could be about more than just the buildings," Olthuis said.

After graduating, Olthuis got a job at a large architecture firm run by one of his former professors. For his first project, a traffic-control center in Wolfheze, he had an initial flirtation with architecture on the water, designing a structure that would be raised up on a plinth above a shallow artificial pond. But he found the firm's corporate culture stultifying. "There was not that much spirit among young architects that you could change the world," he said. An engineering student from the Delft University of Technology, Rolf Peters, was working for a company that was entering a competition to design a master plan for IJburg, a new Amsterdam neighborhood built on artificial islands rising out of IJmeer lake. Olthuis joined the team, and, though their entry didn't win, he and Peters decided to work together again to devise housing for the neighborhood.

The winning plan designated plots for houseboats but had no specifications about what kinds of structures would fill them. In the Netherlands, a houseboat is sold along with the rights to its site on the water, just as a traditional house is legally attached to the plot of land it sits upon. For decades, houseboats have lined Amsterdam's downtown canals. "When you walk through them, your head touches the ceiling, it's damp, it's low, it's unstable," Olthuis said. "But they were on the best locations, so we thought—maybe it was youthful enthusiasm—we can do better." They also saw a business opportunity. On land, many young architects were competing

Among Waterstudio's first projects was a home

to build in limited space. On the water, Olthuis said, they would be "the king with one eye in the land of the blind." Waterstudio launched out of Peters's home, in Haarlem, in 2003.

The firm's first breakthrough came the following year, with the design of a glass-walled houseboat for a wealthy family in the tulip trade. Called the Watervilla Aalsmeer, the home would be anchored on a lake near the warehouses

in Amsterdam's IJburg, one of a number of floating neighborhoods that now exist in the Netherlands.

where flower auctions are held. According to building regulations at the time, the size of the new structure had to match that of the traditional one-story houseboat it was replacing. But Olthuis and Peters discovered that there were no restrictions on building beneath the water. Their design had a footprint of more than two thousand square feet and incorporated flashy features such as wardrobes that lowered into the concrete foundation at the touch of a button, like weapon caches in a supervillain's lair, and a windowless underwater home theatre with seating for twenty. The building became a local media sensation. "We had six or seven camera crews in one house," Olthuis recalled. One television segment featured Olthuis, then clean-shaven and in his early thirties, perching on a plush white sofa in the living room. He recalls telling people at the time, in retrospect too bullishly, "In 2010, we will see floating cities all over the world."

For the homes in IJburg, the city of Amsterdam decided that developers should follow housing codes rather than shipbuilding ones. Floating buildings would be required to have proper insulation and sewage systems that connected to the city's infrastructure; they would also be allowed to rise two stories above the water. Prospective residents could

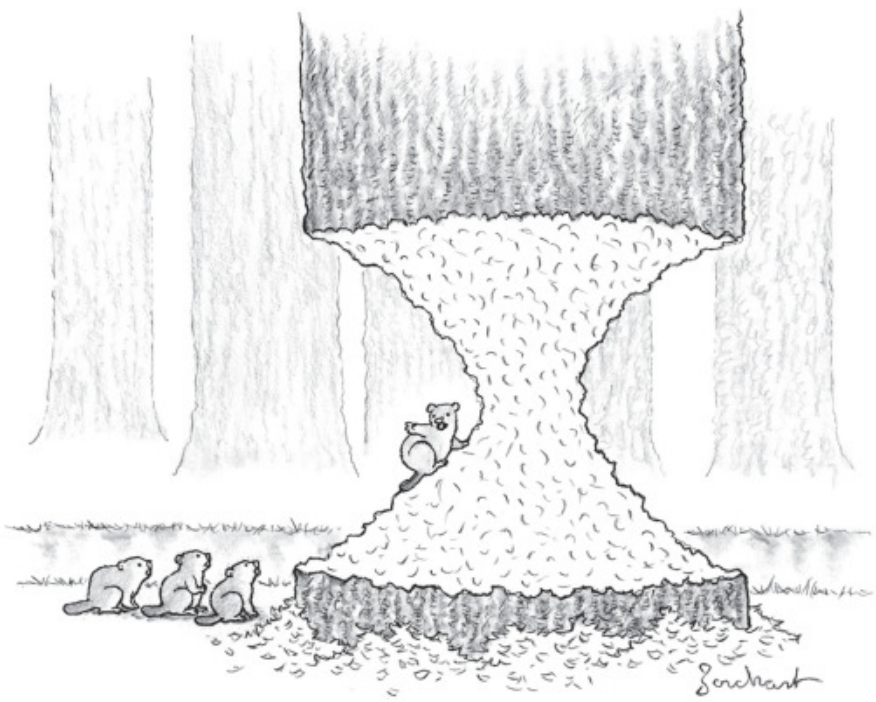
enter a lottery to buy water plots in the neighborhood. In 2008, Waterstudio became the first firm to place a floating home in IJburg. The structure, which is still docked in its original location, has three stories, with bedrooms built into the foundation. When it was first craned into the water, it sank twenty-five centimetres deeper than regulations allowed. (The homeowner later won a lawsuit against one of the contractors for making the structure heavier than it was designed to be.) The team solved the problem by creating inflatable jetties, filled with air and water, that formed a walkway around the building and lifted it back up. Olthuis told me, "From then on, we could use these systems in all our projects."

Waterstudio's IJburg home provided the template for a new generation of water houses in the Netherlands. Today, there are more than twenty floating neighborhoods throughout the country. The homes in IJburg are arranged in a grid resembling miniature city blocks, with narrow docks in lieu of sidewalks. At night, the houses glow like lanterns against the dark water. Buying into the neighborhood has proved a worthy investment: the houses were built for around three hundred thousand euros apiece and now sell for several times that. During my stay in Amsterdam, I rented a room in a B. and B. in IJburg called La Corte Sconta, run by a pair of siblings from another city of water, Venice. The rental bedrooms are on the bottom of three levels, below an open-plan kitchen and a cozy plant-filled common area with wide sliding windows that look onto the water. When I descended the stairs and entered my room, at one end of a short hallway, I noticed that the windows were small and high on the wall, like they would be in an English basement. Peering out, I saw that the surface of the lake rose right up to the bottom of the window, which meant that the floor I was standing on was some six feet underwater. One of the siblings, Auro Cavalcante, who lives on the top floor, told me that he only feels the building moving when there's a storm. The weather that night was clear, but I felt a slight wobbliness, or perhaps merely a psychosomatic case of sea legs, as I contemplated the lake surrounding me, pushing in from all sides.

Today, Waterstudio's headquarters are situated in a former grocery store on a quiet residential street in Rijswijk, a small suburb halfway between The Hague and Delft. Olthuis lives ten minutes away, in a new neighborhood built over a train hub in Delft's downtown. Somewhat contrary to his ideal of modest water-bound designs, he told me that he would move his family to a floating home only if he could acquire a plot of water large enough to accommodate a yard. (When I asked his wife, Charlotte, a chef, if she would be amenable to water living, she said, "I would like that, but maybe only for summer holidays.") The firm's office space, easily visible through its large storefront windows, is small and open, with rows of white tables where employees work. When I arrived one weekday morning, Olthuis was in the middle of his ramen breakfast. He saw me coming and greeted me at the door. "The street and the building are almost one," he said.

Inside, a row of metal shelves running the length of the space was stacked with 3-D-printed models of projects ranging from the already built to the wholly theoretical: a floating hotel with a glass roof, to allow viewings of the northern lights; a spindly tower resembling a vertiginous stack of plates, meant as an artificial water-based habitat for plants and animals; a "seapod" mounted, like a lollipop, on a single pole sticking out of the water, with a home inside. Olthuis encourages an improvisatory approach to designs and materials. He had recently discovered that a recycling company was being paid to dispose of the worn-out blades of wind turbines, which are often buried in landfills. He and a Korean client were discussing the possibility of reusing the hollow fibreglass pieces as foundations for floating walkways, or, perhaps, as single hotel rooms, with windows cut into the sides. The blades would offer "architecture that we never could have made if we had to pay for it," Olthuis said. Such resourcefulness extends to the use of new technologies. At one desk, Anna Vendemia, an Italian who has worked at Waterstudio since 2018, was sitting in front of a pair of monitors and using the artificial-intelligence tool Midjourney to generate renderings of a clamshell-shaped floating hotel suite, with curving glass windows and an onboard swimming pool, for a client in Dubai.

One row over, Sridhar Subramani, who joined the firm from Mumbai seven years ago, was working on a study commissioned by the city of Rotterdam. Home to the largest port in Europe, Rotterdam is situated on the Nieuwe Waterweg, a broad canal that forms the ar-



"In six weeks, you'll want to stand way back."

tificial mouth of the Rhone, flowing out to the North Sea. This position makes Rotterdam particularly vulnerable to flooding, and the local government has invested heavily in adaptive design. In 2019, a floating solar-powered dairy farm with a cheese-making facility on its bottom level opened in the city. The study conducted by Waterstudio was meant to show how a theoretical fleet of mobile floating structures could change locations throughout the day to accommodate city dwellers' routines. In one concept, the platforms represented restaurants that could float to downtown office buildings during lunchtime and then move to residential neighborhoods in the evening. On Subramani's computer screen, tiny building icons migrated around the Nieuwe Maas river in downtown Rotterdam like a swarm of worker bees.

Subramani has an architecture degree but describes himself as an "urban technologist and researcher." Olthuis later told me, "Sridhar is more crazy than I am." When Olthuis interviewed him for a job and asked why he wanted to make floating buildings, Subramani answered that his real goal was to make cities that float in the air, with the help of helium balloons. Rolf Peters, Waterstudio's cofounder, left in 2010 to pursue independent projects. For the past decade, Olthuis's partner at the firm has been Ankie Stam, a forty-four-year-old architect who handles the administrative and marketing sides of the business. "We always attract people who are different than the regular architecture students," Stam told me as she assembled a plate of dark bread, Nutella, and sliced Gouda. "We don't want to make just one very nice, beautiful building."

Scattered around the office, like loose Lego bricks, were tiny 3-D-printed models of houses from the Maldives Floating City. On a tabletop, Olthuis unrolled an enormous sheet of glossy printer paper. It was an aerial rendering of the finished project: a tessellated network of water-bound platforms, like a man-made spiderweb, featuring rows of pastel-colored town houses. Estimated to cost a billion dollars, the development will be situated a fifteen-minute boat ride from the overcrowded capital of Malé. The complex will provide as many as thirteen thousand units of housing, which will rest in a shallow lagoon ringed by reinforced sandbars and coral reefs designed to break waves.

For the Maldives, an archipelagic country in the Indian Ocean, climate change already poses an existential threat. According to geological surveys, eighty per cent of the country could be uninhabitable by 2050. The idea for the floating city originated after the Maldivian President, Mohamed Nasheed, held a stunt cabinet meeting underwater, in scuba gear, in 2009, to promote awareness of the potential effects of climate change on the country. The Dutch consulate in the Maldives, drawing on the Netherlands' international reputation in water-management technology, connected Nasheed to Waterstudio. "In the Maldives, we cannot stop the waves, but we can rise with them," Nasheed has said of the project. But he left office in 2012, and since then Waterstudio has had to navigate four different Maldivian administrations, persuading each of the project's importance in turn. "It's a kind of education," Olthuis said. "You have to start from zero."

A first batch of four houses for the city was recently towed out into the ocean, and Olthuis estimated that construction would be completed by 2028. "It could be faster," he said, adding that, because the homes are modular, multiple factories can be involved in manufacturing them at once. But previous projects have been delayed by zoning trouble, waffling developers, and poor local infrastructure. In 2016, the *Times* reported that ambitious Waterstudio projects in New Jersey and Dubai were scheduled to roll out their first units within a year. Eight years later, Olthuis described both as still awaiting construction. Waterstudio has produced fifteen design iterations for the New Jersey project. "This business is different than building on land," he said. "You have to be very, very patient."

Other firms have followed Waterstudio into floating real estate. The bulk of the Maldives project is being funded by Dutch Docklands, a commercial developer focussed on floating construction, which will supplement the affordable housing with its own luxury floating hotels and homes. (Olthuis is a minor stakeholder in the firm.) In 2021, Oceanix, a New York-based company, and BIG, a firm owned by the Danish starchitect Bjarke Ingels, announced plans to build a floating development off the coast of Busan, South Korea. Oceanix touted the project as "trailblazing a new industry," and trade blogs reported an estimated completion date of 2025, but as of now construction has yet to begin. (Oceanix's co-founder and C.E.O., Itai Madamombe, said that it would likely start by the end of this year.)

Olthuis told me that, as competition from other, bigger firms has grown, Waterstudio has had to engage in a "little bit of a fight" for new jobs. "Our advantage is that we have twenty years of experience," he said, "so we know a bit more the tricks and the problems, and that will keep us ahead of other people for the next three to five years." Any attention brought to floating architecture is a good thing, in his opinion, so long as firms can deliver on their splashy promises. "There are not that many projects, and each of these projects has to succeed," he said.

The most devastating natural catastrophe in modern Dutch history was the North Sea flood of 1953. Known as the Watersnoodramp, it resulted from an intense windstorm over the ocean meeting high spring tides. Residents in the north of the country were awoken in the middle of the night, on February 1st, by an initial deluge that inundated densely settled islands and filled carefully maintained polders. Railways flooded and telephone poles were destroyed, cutting off communication to the region. An official alert did not reach residents until 8 A.M., by which time many were stranded in their attics or on their roofs. "It was as if we were spectators as the world ended," one witness in the village of Kruiningen recalled. The next day, at 4 P.M., another wave of water came, even higher than the first, and destroyed many of the structures that still stood. Some survivors waited days for large ships to reach the area. In all, nearly two thousand people died.

The disaster forced the Dutch government to confront the inadequacy of

"I thought I heard you twisting and turning in the night."

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its aging dike system. Just weeks after the flood, a committee was formed to develop a national water-defense plan, which became known as the Delta Works, involving more than twenty thousand kilometres of new seawalls, dikes, and dams. Its crowning element, completed in 1998, was the Maeslantkering, a hulking steel storm-surge barrier separating the Nieuwe Waterweg canal from the North Sea.

One afternoon, Olthuis drove me through the countryside to the Maeslantkering. Outside Dutch city centers, the artificiality of the landscape becomes harder to ignore. The roads were the highest point in the topography; from the car's passenger window, I could see down into farm fields below, which were dotted with pools of water from recent storms. Small canals traversed the uneven ground in straight lines. The land rose as we moved toward the coast—the lip on a giant bowl of kung-pao chicken—which created the strange sensation of looking upward to see the surface of the sea. Many of the canals running through the farmland were fortified with low hillocks covered in grass. "It takes almost nothing to break these," Olthuis said of the barriers. "Don't talk to terrorists, because if you want to screw up this country you only have to break a few dikes and then the whole system breaks. From here on half of Amsterdam will flood."

The Nieuwe Waterweg was crowded with industrial ships and oil rigs heading out to sea. Wind turbines lined both shores. Olthuis pulled into a parking lot that looked out onto the Maeslantkering, which the architecture critic Michael Kimmelman has called "one of modern Europe's lesser-known marvels." Among the largest moving structures ever built, it is composed of two identical white steel frames, each weighing close to seven thousand tons, situated on opposite banks of the canal. A computer system tracks the levels of the Nieuwe Waterweg; if the water rises too high, the system activates and the two frames rotate from either bank, ferrying sections of curved steel wall that meet in the middle and seal the canal from the surging sea.

Olthuis and I walked up to a metal fence plastered with warning signs. The closest part of the steel frames stood a dozen yards away. Their trussing often earns them comparisons to the Eiffel Tower—they are only slightly shorter—but to me they looked more like a roller coaster turned on its side. Standing dwarfed beside them, I felt a heady, slightly ominous thrill.

The Maeslantkering is designed to withstand the kinds of storms that are projected to happen only once every ten thousand years. So far, outside of test runs, it has been activated on just one occasion, in December of last year, during Storm Pia. But Harold van Waveren, the flood-risk-management expert at Rijkswaterstaat, told me that, if severe storms grow more frequent and the Maeslantkering stays closed for too long, the river water that would otherwise flow out to sea would have no outlet and might flood the region regardless. "We need a whole spectrum of solutions, from very small scale to large scale," he said. The country has taken steps toward creating more capacity for water, as Olthuis envisions. The so-called Room for the River project, completed between 2006 and 2021, deepened and widened stretches of rivers at thirty locations and replaced some artificial banks with sections of wetland landscape. Still, van Waveren seemed skeptical that floating architecture was the future. "I'm not sure if it's possible on a large scale," he said.

Jeroen Aerts, the head of the department of Water and Climate Risk at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and one of the country's leading environmental researchers, was even more dubious. "Will there be large floating cities? I don't see this happening, to be honest," he said. Living on water "is not in the culture of Dutch people," he continued. "On average, a Dutch person, you want to have a garden, you want two floors." Olthuis agrees, in a fashion. The biggest obstacles to large-scale waterborne construction are not technological or financial, he said, but attitudinal. A NIMBYism can set in when you ask Dutch people to imagine a wetter way of living. "They like it, but not in their back yard," Olthuis said. "If you ask them if their garden should be water, they say no." He spoke with frustration about the sluggishness of Dutch bureaucracy, and its reluctance to adjust its defensive posture toward the Waterwolf. The country is "stuck in engineering solutions that we already used for the last fifty years," he said. New ones are urgently needed, "but the politicians are not ready." We'd ascended a hill to get a better view of the canal. Ships passed continuously through the open Maeslantkering. The Netherlands' familiarity with flooding has created paradoxical roadblocks to floating construction, Olthuis said: "If your country is threatened by water, your legal framework doesn't allow you to be close to it." Piecemeal owner-

ship of floating structures is not allowed in the Netherlands, which disincentivizes developers who might want to build and sell multiunit housing. Plus, the parcels of Dutch water that are sold for houses remain limited in size, preventing the construction of taller floating buildings, like the Waterstudio apartments in Scandinavia. "The city has to rezone this water and then allow you to build plots of a hundred by a hundred feet," he said. "We've drawn the plans many times. We're still waiting for the right city or town to approve."

To see Waterstudio's most ambitious completed project, I had to travel outside the Netherlands, to the French city of Lyon. The Théâtre L'Île Ô floats in the Rhone off a paved waterside promenade near the Gallieni bridge. ("Ô" is a homophone for *eau*, the French word for "water.") On a winter afternoon, multilane roads above the riverbanks roared with cars, but compared with the bustling Dutch rivers the water on the Rhone was quiet. The theatre comprises six tilted polygons made of white steel and cut through with irregularly shaped windows. Linked to the bank by three gangways, it protrudes from the river like shards of an iceberg.

The building, which opened to the public in early 2023, is the second location of Patadôme, a local organization that hosts performances for children. But Olthuis described the theatre, more loftily, as a "global, mobile asset," a piece of public infrastructure that, if no longer wanted in Lyon, can simply be towed down the Rhone and docked in Avignon, perhaps, or in Marseille. Its current lease lasts eighteen years, and its modular design makes it adaptable to different uses. David Lahille, Patadôme's director of business development, managed the construction project. "Today, it is a theatre," he told me. "Tomorrow, if we want to change it to a school, it's easy."

The idea for the new theatre emerged in 2018, when control over Lyon's waterways was transferred to the French federal government and the city launched an initiative to renew the waterfront. At the time, Patadôme had been looking to build a new space, but construction of theatres on land remains strictly regulated in France, owing to an old monarchic precedent dating to Louis XIV. A theatre on the water would be exempt from that rule. "We thought about buying a ship and modifying the ship," Lahille said. They found Waterstudio, which suggested an ambitious new construction designed from scratch.

An ebullient Frenchman with a background in engineering, Lahille recalled that, during the team's first meeting at Waterstudio's office, Olthuis pulled out a box of wooden blocks, spilled them out onto a table, and asked the clients to construct a model of the river landscape. Then he had them improvise a shape for the theatre using the same blocks, which eventually inspired the whimsically geometric design. "You become a child, trying to imagine," Lahille said. Getting the project approved, though, required bureaucratic wrangling at both the local and national level, and in the end hinged on the enthusiasm of a single official, Jean-Bastien Gambonnet, who in 2021 was promoted to lead the local River Navigation Unit within the French Ministry of Ecological Transition. Gambonnet hustled to get approval from both Lyon and Paris. The process took about a year. "Here in France, usually, it's more than ten years," Lahille said.

The theatre's concrete foundation was poured five miles outside the city. The bridges over the Rhone are unusually low, so the top floor of the building had to be constructed in situ. When the floating platform was ready to be craned into the water, there was a question of whether the bank of the river was strong enough to bear the weight—fifteen hundred tons in total—so the contractors rushed to reinforce the bank in a matter of weeks, using twenty-metre-long steel piles. (Gambonnet told them that he would smooth out the paperwork after the fact.) "I said to the port owner, 'Now you have one of the most powerful quays in France,'" Lahille said.

Walking into the theatre's lobby, a visitor is surrounded from floor to ceiling by pale exposed beams of cross-laminated timber, a lightweight engineered wood. When I toured the space, a children's production of "Animal Farm" was just letting out of the larger of two theatres, a cavernous auditorium with two hundred and forty-four stadium seats. Long strips of bamboo created wavelike patterns on the walls and ceiling, both for acoustics and to evoke the aquatic surroundings. Confetti dotted the floor, and children milled about onstage, inspecting a wooden barn. The windowless space seemed far too large to fit inside the building I'd entered, and in a sense it was: from the outside, a third of the theatre's height is hidden beneath the river. "Right now, you are under the water," one of the stagehands told me. He said that he could detect the building moving only when the occasional large boat passed by at high speed.

When the theatre opened, some locals complained that its modern design clashed with the city's neoclassical stone architecture. "Very ugly," one wrote in the comments section of a news article about the project. "Pretentious, both in substance and in form," another wrote. Jean-Philippe Amy, the director of the Théâtre L'Île Ô, told me, "Lyon is a traditional city," but added that the space has a way of converting visitors, especially the young ones who make up Patadôme's target audience. Children can peek out the windows and see the current drifting by at eye level. On sunny days, reflections of the river's rippling surface dance on the building's façade.

This past December, the French Alps experienced a week of heavy rains. The Rhone, which ferries glacial meltwater down from the mountains, swelled with the excess precipitation. In the center of Lyon, where the Rhone meets the Saone, the current strengthened. On the night of December 12th, flooding was forecast, but the Théâtre L'Île Ô decided to forge ahead with a scheduled event hosted by the city's Irish consulate. The water arrived sooner and more forcefully than anticipated. To enter the building, guests had to walk across a makeshift wooden bridge laid atop one of the gangways. From the first-floor windows, they watched the Rhone rush by. "You could see these trees going very fast on the flow," Lahille recalled. He kept an eye on his phone, monitoring the river's height, but as the land began to flood the crowd in the theatre's underwater auditorium remained completely dry. When Lahille left, at 1 A.M., the water on the banks reached his knees. From land, the theatre looked elevated, suspended on the swollen river. "The building survived, like a boat," Lahille said. "It goes up and down, and it's not a problem. The only problem is leaving it." ♦

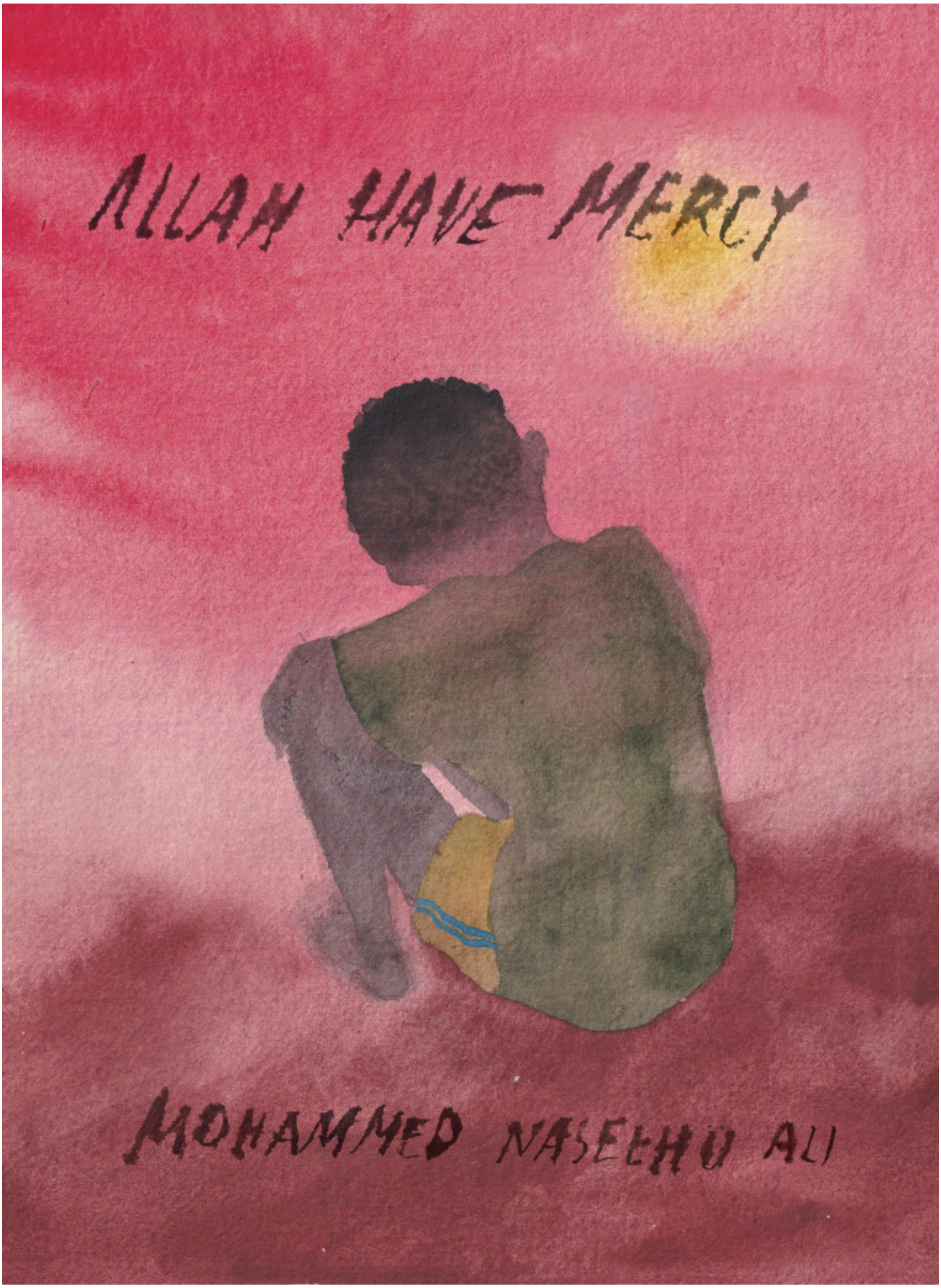


ILLUSTRATION BY CJE

A huge hand grabbed the back of my neck as I stepped out of the Rex Cinema, and, instinctively, I knew whose hand it was. "I beg you, forgive me, in Allah's name," I pleaded. Uncle Usama's wide palm came down across my face, the force of the blow nearly capsizing me. "Shut up, you bastard child," he shouted. With squinting, teary eyes, I watched the two friends I was with flee the scene, merging into the throng of cinemagoers. Uncle's long fingers gripped my neck again, creating a noose of flesh and bone. "In Allah's name, I beg for your pardon. I won't do this again," I managed to say amid dry sobs. I felt a throbbing pain in my head, and my legs began to buckle under the weight of his hand pressing down on my neck. Uncle must have noticed this; he released my neck and quickly grabbed my elbow, yanking me alongside him. I labored to keep up with his long strides, but kept falling behind and stepping on the back of his flip-flops. He gave me a slap each time this happened, then continued to drag me forcefully, the way goat sellers dragged their animals on the dirt roads of the city.

"Papa, please beg him for me. Please, Papa, beg him for me!" I directed desperate pleas at passersby, hoping they would come to my rescue, but the pedestrians only stared curiously at us before rushing on. Uncle's massive build was enough to deter anyone who thought of intervening on my behalf. For some of the onlookers, especially the fruit hawkers and food venders who lined the front side of the Rex Cinema, this wasn't the first time they had witnessed a helpless child being dragged by Uncle Usama, who was, in fact, the official disciplinarian of Zongo Street. Parents would send for him to punish their misbehaving children. He'd arrive in haste, wielding his infamous *baranzu*, ready to leave an indelible mark on the child's skin. It was a service that Uncle Usama, a headmaster by profession, relished, and he rendered it free of charge to anyone who requested it. That was how he got the nickname Zorro, after the masked hero who used his bullwhip to fight the exploiters of his people. Uncle Usama knew about this nickname (which, of course, was used only behind his back), and he cherished the fear that it instilled in the children of Zongo Street.

Uncle was prone to emotional unrest and to meanness. He rarely laughed, and while most adults saw his erratic behavior as a sign of his education and intelligence, I—at twelve, his oldest nephew—viewed him differently. You see, his wife, Mma Asibi, was a difficult woman who completely dominated her husband. Many evenings during my Arabic lessons in their sitting room, I had seen my fierce and fearless uncle reduced to pleading with Mma Asibi when they had an argument. And though I was a mere child I was utterly convinced that Uncle Usama's violent outbursts were the direct result of his inability to control his wife.

"If you don't shut up, your punishment will triple when we get home," Uncle Usama threatened as he dragged me past the long line of venders selling *kelewele*, fried yam, *tchofi*, and bread which stretched along the wide pavement of Zerikyi Road and past the group of mendicants who had begun to pack up their dusty mats, calling it a day. We walked alongside the happy kids playing *bodi bo dibo* in the yard of the BP petrol station, running frantically and looking for a place to hide. We made our way through the exuberant crowd of town people heading to the eight-thirty show at the Rex. We were aiming for Kofar Fada, the wide passageway that led to Zongo Street, but Uncle quickly swerved left to avoid having me address any pleas to the group of men who sat near the passageway. The change of route took us to a half-lit alley that led directly to the back entrance of our compound. Uncle walked even faster now, and his salty sweat dripped onto my already sweaty face, causing my eyes to sting.

Halfway down the alley, we saw Mma Zeenata, the old woman who lived in the compound next to ours. Not wanting her to realize what was going on, Uncle Usama slowly released his grip on my arm. I knew that this was my only chance to get out of the trouble I was in. So I started bawling. Uncle Usama squeezed my wrist, in an attempt to silence me, but the pain caused me to cry even louder. "*Wayyo*, *Wayyo*, *Allah*," I screamed.

"*Ina wuni*," Uncle said to Mma Zeenata.

"*Lafiya lau*," she responded, indicating that her evening was just fine. Then she carried on in her frail voice about how stubborn the "children of today" were, and how one had to "exercise patience in dealing with them." Uncle started to reply to her. But I wasn't going to let the opportunity slip by. Before he could finish his sentence, I had reached the entrance of the alley and was heading back toward Kofar Fada. With the old woman watching, I knew there was no way that Uncle would chase after me. I ran with a sprinter's zeal, my flip-flops making a *pat-pat* sound with every stride, a rhythm that matched my rapid heartbeat.

On reaching our compound, I headed straight to my parents' quarters. Mother and her best friend, Mma Zakiya, sat on nylon mats on our adjoining verandas. With Father constantly travelling and Mma Zakiya neglected by her husband, the two women spent every evening on their verandas, in the company of their two servant girls, my younger brother, Haris, and my sister, Salima. They chatted when they had things to chat about, and remained silent when they had nothing to say to each other. At those moments, they would stare blankly into the starry sky, as if meditating on the stars—Mother probably wishing that her husband were around, and Mma Zakiya wishing that Allah had blessed her with a child. Eventually, one of them would start to doze, and then each would ask for the other's forgiveness before retiring to her chambers.

I sat down next to Mother, placing my hands in her lap.

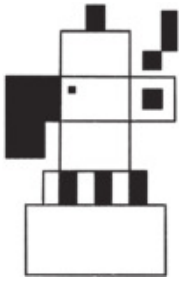
"Yaro, what is wrong?" Mother asked.

"There is nothing. I was just playing outside," I replied. Mother didn't know that I had sneaked out to the cinema with my friends. She ran her fingers through my hair. I sighed with relief, though my heart continued to beat fast. I was aware that my daring escape had made Uncle look like a fool, and I knew that from that evening on I would be in the crosshairs of his vengeance. The slightest wrong I committed would draw the harshest punishment I had ever suffered from him.

A few minutes later, I heard the banging of the mosquito-proofed door at Uncle Usama's quarters, up the hill. For every kid in the compound, the sound of that door was a cat's meow to a family of mice. It told us either that

we could resume playing outside (if he was entering his quarters), or that we should run for our dear lives (if he was stepping out).

In the weeks following my daring alley escape, I did everything I could to be on my best behavior. I arrived at Uncle's quarters as soon as I'd finished supper, and made sure that the bread I purchased for his and Auntie Asibi's breakfast was soft and moist and freshly baked. Then one unlucky night, nearly two months into my stellar-behavior effort, I purchased a loaf that failed to meet Uncle's high standards. He squeezed the air out of the loaf, sniffed it, then threw it in my direction, nearly hitting me in the face. "This bread feels like it was baked a week ago," he barked. "It is stale and hard. Didn't you inspect it before you gave them the money?" He ordered me to return the bread to the seller, get the money back, and buy him a better *buredi* from a vender who carried bread from the Lawyer's House Bakery, his favorite. I opened my mouth to tell him that I had bought the bread from the right vender but quickly shut it again, afraid to anger him further. I picked up the bread from the floor and ran out of the room.



When I reached Zerikyi Road, however, the vender swore that she would neither take back the bread nor refund the money.

"Do you think I'm the kind of fool who would take *this* back?" she said. She lobbed the loaf at me, and luckily I reacted quickly enough to catch it before it could hit the ground. After all the manhandling by Uncle and now the bread seller, the loaf looked bruised and broken. I imagined the trouble that awaited me if I returned home without a new loaf, and dug in my heels. I burst into tears, stomping my feet on the ground. At first the vender paid no attention to my tantrum, but soon she realized that that wasn't a good strategy. I was driving customers away from her table.

"Listen, I don't want any of your witchcraft, oh!" she screamed, pointing her fingers threateningly in my face. "That's how you *ntafuor* people are, putting your *beyie* on people's merchandise. Please leave my area. I have warned you, oh. And let me tell you once again: I will not give the money back to you tonight or tomorrow or the day after." She shoved me away from her table, and as I stumbled the bread slipped out of the old *Daily Graphic* newspaper in which I had rewrapped it and fell noiselessly onto the dusty ground. I howled and quickly picked it up, then began to cry even louder, though I was certain by that point that all was lost.

Luckily, my performance attracted the attention of a few passersby, who stopped and inquired what the matter was. I explained my side of the story to a tall, muscular man, whose imposing appearance reminded me of my uncle, though he seemed affable, even kind. He listened attentively to my story, and as I spoke the bread seller fumed with anger, muttering curses under her breath.

"Papa, tell me, would you allow this nonsense if it were you?" she jumped in as soon as I had finished. "For someone to buy food from you and return it after it has been touched and dirtied all over? If I take back this bread, who is going to buy it from me, eh? Look at it!" The man didn't respond. He appeared to be in a quandary as to whom to sympathize with.

"I won't take it back even if he cries tears of blood. And take your *musuo* somewhere else. Please, get away from my table, oh!" she exclaimed.

As I continued to sob, a few more people were drawn to the vender's table. Among them was a Gao Muslim man. I knew this from the white djellabah he wore, and from his long goatee and his tall, lean figure. There were also two middle-aged women whose unctuous body smell told me that they were fried-fish venders from a few stalls over. Meanwhile, the muscular man was trying to reason with the bread vender. "Listen, he is only a child," he said. "The fault is with whoever sent him. Imagine if he were your son and out this late. Please have pity on him," he pleaded.

"The one who should have pity should be his stupid mother or father who sent him back with the bread," the vender shot right back. "Listen, Papa, I respect you, but stop wasting your time. I. Am. Not. Taking. It. Back. Even if God himself comes down to beg me." I lost every bit of hope on hearing this. But, after a brief silence, the Gao man, who had been quietly listening to the proceedings, stepped in. "How much did you pay for the bread?" he asked in broken Hausa.

"Five cedis," I replied, between intermittent, rather fake sobs.

He reached into the side pocket of his djellabah and produced a crisp five-cedi note. He handed it to me, saying, "The matter is over now." He took the bread from me and placed it on the vender's table. She immediately grabbed the miserable loaf and hurled it into a nearby trash can. "Don't leave your *kramo juju* and bad luck with me here, oh, *abeyifuor!*" she screamed. It was clear that her insults—she had an Asante person's typical prejudice against Muslims—were directed not only at me but also at the Gao man and at my Hausa tribe. She shifted from one leg to the other, as if daring us all to engage her in a physical fight. I didn't wait for any such confrontation; I had got the money back and that was all that mattered. I ran all the way home. In my hurry to flee, I forgot to thank the Gao man.

When I walked into Uncle Usama's sitting room his head was buried in the Tawrat. Uncle's main area of theological study involved the long-lost books of Zabur (the psalms revealed to David), the Tawrat (the laws revealed to Moses), and the Injeel (the Gospels revealed to Jesus). Scholars came to him from all over our region seeking knowledge of the important manuscripts that were omitted from the modern Bible. I waited anxiously for Uncle to look up, so that I could tell him what had taken place on Zerikyi Road. A minute or so passed in silence, then, without moving his eyes from the book, Uncle suddenly bellowed, "Aha, where is the *new* bread?"

"All the other venders had closed and gone home by the time I got the money back," I stammered.

"So you are telling me there is no bread in this entire city of Kumasi?" he screamed, and finally looked up.

I made a futile attempt to respond, to tell him that it was late and that there was only one vender left on Zerikyi Road, and that it had taken the kindness of a

passerby even to get the money back. But before I could utter a word a vicious slap had caught the right side of my face. I felt my teeth move inside my mouth and tasted blood on my tongue as my legs buckled. I fell onto the couch, hitting my head against its wooden arm. Mma Asibi didn't so much as stir or attempt to plead on my behalf. She remained seated on the carpeted steps leading to their inner chamber, breast-feeding my baby cousin Rajab. I forced myself to my feet, even though I was dizzy, and bolted out of the room before Uncle could strike again. I headed straight to the gate of the compound and made my way toward Zerikyi Road. Many kids were still outside, playing evening games. I tried to ignore the pain I felt in my mouth and on my face. The alleys were deserted now, and, after walking a few metres down the street, I got scared and retreated. Just a week before there had been rumors that children were being snatched and sold to Nigerian businessmen, who performed sacrifices that made them wealthy overnight. Not to mention that Dan Tchamado, the half-mad, half-destitute man who walked with his head tilted back so that he was facing the sky, had recently set up a cardboard house at the end of our block.

Back at the compound, playmates, oblivious of the trauma I was going through, begged me to join them in the last game of the night. I ignored them and headed straight to Kaka Sati's quarters, knowing that my grandmother was the only one who could save my skin from Uncle Usama's whip that night. My mother was powerless against him. In Father's absence, his younger brother, Uncle Usama, was the one in charge.

After she had listened to my story, Kaka Sati said to me, "Stay here, and I'll go and talk to him." Kaka Sati was sometimes upset by the harsh punishments that Uncle Usama delivered to me and my cousin Hafiz, Uncle's oldest son, who was two years younger than me. But, like my father, she was a traveller and was often away at the markets in Atebubu and Ejura.

"I have asked him to pardon you for this one," Kaka Sati assured me upon her return to her chambers. "But first thing tomorrow morning he wants you to go to Lawyer's House directly and buy him a fresh loaf. Did you hear?" I nodded.

"Now, hurry back to your mother's quarters. She is waiting for you."

As usual, Mother was sitting, legs stretched out on a mat, facing Mma Zakiya. From our veranda, there was a clear view of the entire compound. And I was quite sure that Mother had observed everything that had gone on that evening. She might even have heard the sound of the heavy slap and my fall onto Uncle Usama's couch. My hunch was proved correct when Mother got up suddenly, excused herself from Mma Zakiya, and walked me into our chambers. One look at my face, and her eyes welled up. Without saying a word, she opened a container of shea-nut butter and rubbed some on my cheek, where the mark of Uncle's fingers must have been visible. Using my tongue, I did a circumference check of my teeth. Luckily none was broken, though I could still taste blood from a cut on the inside of my upper lip. "I am sorry, my *shehu*, please take heart," Mother said, as if she were the one who had assaulted me.

The following morning, after *subhi*, I recited the Quran and practiced my verses until the first rays of sun seeped through our louvered-glass windows. By six o'clock I was out of the compound and on my way to Lawyer's House, in the Ocansey district, to purchase Uncle Usama and Auntie Asibi's bread.

The week that followed was tense. Frustrated by her inability to protect me, Mother took to lobbing curses any time she heard the dreadful bang of Uncle Usama's door. She didn't greet him for a couple of days, but then feared that her belligerence might make matters worse for me. She decided to act friendlier toward him, but only when she had to. She

"I've only been able to find movies, music, and restaurants that I kind of like using apps, but I'm hoping they'll lead me to the love of my life."

did everything she could to avoid running into him in the compound. I overheard her saying to Mma Zakiya one night, "It is a heartless woman who sits and watches as other people's children are treated the way her husband treats my child. *Wallahi Allah*, one of these days, if Kaji doesn't talk to his brother, I am going to ask that useless man to keep his hands off my child. And if he doesn't stop then he may just have to beat me, too."

The relationship between Mother and Mma Asibi also grew sour that week, as Mma Asibi had somehow got wind of the curses being directed at her. Uncle Usama, sensing Mother's hostility, took to pushing me around even more, a deliberate attempt to cause me to err, and thus provide him with a legitimate excuse to flog me. But I did everything perfectly. I abandoned the football field altogether. I bought the perfect loaf of bread every evening, and did so right after the Isha prayers. Mother advised me not to go outside and play after my Arabic lesson. "Don't give him any chance to trap you," she said with gritted teeth.

Mother's new attitude was a big shock to me. She had a reputation as the quietest and most peaceful woman, and yet there she was playing face-me-I-face-you with the most feared man on Zongo Street. It was unheard of even for a woman to show sympathy for her child when he was disciplined by an uncle or an auntie, let alone defend the child the way Mother did publicly. And, as much as I admired Mother, I was afraid that, if the passive-aggressive tension between her and Uncle Usama escalated into an open verbal confrontation, it had the potential to get ugly. Uncle Usama would flog both Mother and me in front of the whole compound. I said special prayers for Allah to prevent such an incident, and was relieved, therefore, when after a fortnight or so the tension eased a bit. Kaka Sati sat down Auntie Asibi and my mother in her chambers one night and told them point blank to drop their "pettiness and act like responsible women." But she said nothing to my uncle.

Still, I behaved as if I were living on the thatched roof of a mud hut, moving gingerly to avoid falling through. For his part, Uncle Usama acted as if all were well, as if he had forgotten everything. One afternoon he even bought some *biyan-tankwa* and *pinkaso* for me and Hafiz—something he rarely did. On another occasion, he asked Auntie Asibi to make us some fried eggs for breakfast, which she sandwiched between slices of the precious bread I had bought the night before.

Uncle continued to act so nicely that even the pupils at the madrassa agreed that a change of some kind had occurred. He actually went a whole month without whipping a student. He took to wearing his white djellabah more often than the red, black, and brown ones. (Each color signified a different level of his mental and emotional state. Days when Uncle wore red were called "danger days": a simple mispronunciation during a recitation could draw six or more lashes on a pupil's back.) Every kid in the compound, myself included, enjoyed the freedom that came with Uncle's sudden change of character. We hoped and prayed that Uncle Usama had truly turned over a new leaf.

It was during this momentous period of détente that Hafiz and I felt emboldened to ask Uncle Usama for permission to go swimming at the University Pool at Tech. To our wondrous surprise, he granted it. He even gave us lorry fare and a little extra money to buy Fanta and biscuits at the pool's refreshment center. For the first time, my heart didn't speed up as I stood in front of Uncle; I didn't have the persistent feeling that I had done something wrong. I felt an entirely new self-confidence.

For the two hours we spent at the pool, I kept an eye on the giant clock atop the refreshment center. The pool usually closed at five, and at four-thirty the lifeguards started making their calls for "last swim." I wanted to beat the crowd that swarmed the Ayigya lorry station after the pool closed. More important, I needed to make sure that we made it home before six o'clock, so as not to miss the Maghrib prayers. It was a struggle to get Hafiz out of the water, but he eventually joined me in the dressing room. We quickly rinsed ourselves, dressed, and headed for the lorry station.

As Hafiz and I approached the compound, we saw Uncle Usama standing by the side entrance, his hands folded behind his back. I guessed that it was about a quarter to six, a good thirty minutes before the muezzin's call to Maghrib prayers. With a pompous air, I waved to my friends, some of whom were clearly jealous of my newfound freedom. Hafiz walked behind me at a slower pace, and he, too, waved at our friends. I felt like a big boy, a hero, even, because Uncle had trusted me to take care of Hafiz, and allowed us to travel all the way to Tech and back on our own. When we were about three feet from the entrance, I prepared myself to go down on my knees to greet Uncle in the traditional manner. But as I leaned forward I felt a violent blow on the back of my head and neck. I fell face first to the ground, but quickly got up so that I could greet Uncle. It was then that I realized what had happened—that I had been struck by Zorro's *baranzu*. Uncle's hands, it became clear, had been behind his back in order to hide the bullwhip. Hafiz, terrified of his father, had probably sensed what was going to happen, which was why he'd walked so slowly as we neared the compound. He bolted as soon as the whip hit my head. I didn't see Hafiz for a week.

Uncle followed the first blow with even more vicious ones, and each crack of the whip sounded like thunder in my ears. The sixth or seventh blow sent me crashing to the ground again, but Uncle did not stop. I wailed for help, even though I knew no one would dare come to my rescue. The only people he listened to were the compound's three grandmothers, Kaka Sati being one of them, and the old women were in their inner chambers, getting ready for Maghrib prayers—which led me to believe that his attack at this particular time was calculated. Then I felt something that I had never felt during Uncle's previous beatings: instead of being fearful, I was fuming with anger. "This is not fair," I heard myself say. I stopped screaming and begging for mercy. I lay flat on my back and spread my arms as if I had fainted. I had thought of doing this before—feigning a collapse or a seizure, in the hope that it would scare off Uncle and perhaps keep him from beating me again. I don't really know what convinced me to perform such a stunt, because it could have ended really badly. But I was angry, and, on one level, I truly wished to die at Uncle's hands that evening, to leave him with the mental

THE HYMN

It began as an almost inaudible hum,
low and long for the solar winds
and far dim galaxies,

a hymn growing louder, for the moon and the sun,
a song without words for the snow falling,
for snow conceiving snow

conceiving rain, the rivers rushing without shame,
the hum turning again higher—into a riff of ridges,
peaks hard as consonants,

summits and praise for the rocky faults and crust and crevices
then down down to the roots and rocks and burrows,
the lakes' skittery surfaces, wells, oceans, breaking

waves, the salt-deep: the warm bodies moving within it:
the cold deep: the deep underneath gleaming, some of us rising
as the planet turned into dawn, some lying down

as it turned into dark; as each of us rested—another woke, standing
among the cast-off cartons and automobiles;
we left the factories and stood in the parking lots,

left the subways and stood on sidewalks, in the bright offices,
in the cluttered yards, in the farmed fields,
in the mud of the shantytowns, breaking into

harmonies we'd not known possible, finding the chords as we
found our true place singing in a million
million keys the human hymn of praise for every

something else there is and ever was and will be:
the song growing louder and rising.
(Listen, I, too, believed it was a dream.)

—Marie Howe

and spiritual torment of having killed a human being. Death would treat me better than he did, I thought, as another blow caught me on the chest, tearing my cotton shirt and slicing open my skin. "*Laa ilaha illa llah*"—I recited the Kalma-shahada. I had visions of myself in the Abrahamic lyceum situated in the special section of Heaven reserved for Muslims who died before puberty. I imagined all the fun I would have there with Munsulu, a cousin who had been crushed to death after a football match at the Kumasi Sports Stadium.

Uncle suddenly stopped. He walked away as if nothing had happened, didn't even bother to turn around and verify if I had truly fainted. I closed my eyes and stayed where I was. After a while I heard voices around me; the kids I had walked past moments ago were crowded around me, whispering to one another.

I don't recall how long it took, but eventually I lifted myself up to a sitting position. I was bathed in the street's pervasive red dust. A cut on my cheek was still bleeding, and my shirt was streaked with blood from the cuts on my arms, neck, and back. I felt weak, yet I made an effort and stood up. A friend handed me the blue Adidas duffelbag that contained my swimming gear, which had gone flying when I was hit by the first blow. In my pounding head I kept asking, "But why? He gave us permission to go? What did we do wrong?"

Every eye was directed at me as I entered the compound. I did a quick scan of the courtyard for signs of Mother, but she was not on our veranda and not in the communal kitchen shed. I found her pacing back and forth in the living room, sobbing. When I walked in, she wrapped her arms around me, then pulled away to inspect me. She was alarmed when she saw the cut on my forehead. "Sit here," she said, pointing at the blue artificial-leather couch. She ran outside and returned moments later with a bowl of warm water. She soaked a towel in the water, squeezed out some of the liquid, then, using an antiseptic, cleaned the blood and dust from my face, chest, and back. She put on a few bandages, gave me a fresh shirt and shorts to wear, and carried out the water and the towel.

My head felt very light, and my vision seemed to be flickering. A tall, lanky, old man appeared and started speaking to me. I sensed that he was Mother's father, the imam, who had died long ago, when I was only three or four years old. Grandfather Imam smiled and held my hands and asked me to walk with him. He took me to visit Munsulu, who seemed happy, though where he was didn't resemble the Abrahamic lyceum. It was, instead, a vast, misty void that appeared to have no gravitational force—we floated around like fish in the depths of the ocean. Grandfather suddenly vanished, Munsulu, too, and I felt Mother's hands on my chest. I sat upright on the couch.

"Why are you crying?" Mother asked.

"Grandfather Imam," I said, wiping the tears that were rolling down my cheeks. "Where is he?"

Mother's eyes were wide with fright. She placed the palm of her right hand over my mouth and whispered, "Please keep quiet." She lifted my weak body and walked about the room in a circular motion, the way *mallams* do to dispel evil jinns. She wept as she did so, then suddenly put me back on the couch and dashed out of the room.

The next thing I knew, half a dozen women were standing over me, including Kaka Sati. One woman said that an

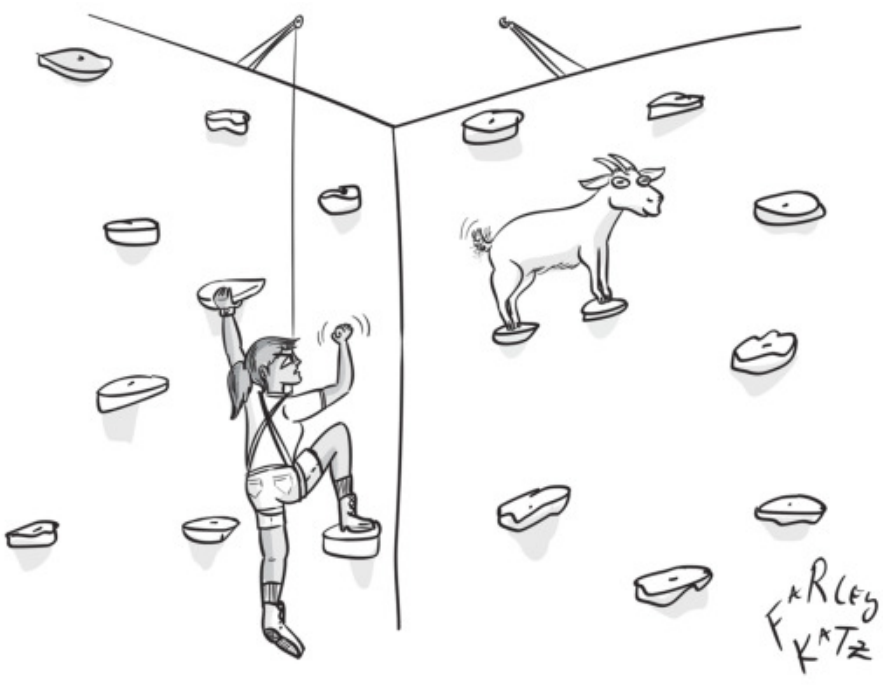
evil spirit had been on the loose the past three days, stealing children's souls, and that my mother was lucky the bad spirits had accosted me while I was in the compound. "We would've been wailing on the streets searching for him right now," the woman continued. A couple of the women blamed my situation on the heat, while others thought I was playing a trick of some sort on my mother, to avoid going to school the next day. Though the welts on my forehead and arms were visible to the women, none of them seemed to attribute my condition to the trouncing I'd received from Uncle Usama. They were perhaps being cautious not to meddle in my family's affairs. And, besides, who dared to criticize Uncle Usama?

I wanted the women to leave me alone with Mother, who was still absent from the room. I wished Father were around, so that I could ask him if, like everyone else on Zongo Street, he was afraid of Uncle Usama. I badly needed to know why Father wouldn't ask him to stop beating me.

An aunt barged into the room with a smelly paste that looked like a mixture of sawdust, ground myrrh, and incense oil. She began to rub the greasy stuff on my face and body, and very soon the sharp scent of the potion took over the room. Moments after that, Mother walked in with a bowl of dry-fish pepper soup, which she had apparently been preparing all this time. The soup was boiling hot, and its fragrant, spicy aroma instantly restored my spirits.

"What did you rub on him?" Mother said when she noticed my oily face. She pushed a couple of the women aside and moved closer to me. "Please let me feed him before they kill him," she lamented, her voice tinged with rage. The women were taken aback by Mother's behavior—not so much because of what she had said but because of the anger with which she said it. This was unusual for her. "If I don't make a stand and fight back they will kill my son for me," she sobbed, and held the soup bowl to my face. The women backed away and filed out of the room. Only Kaka Sati stayed behind. I had never seen such a look on Mother's face, and, while one side of me enjoyed her protection, the other just wanted to see her be her affable self.

"Give him some A.P.C. and rub some Mentholatum on his body afterward," Grandmother finally said to Mother, who simply nodded and continued to feed me. I realized that Grandmother's suggestion was the closest anyone had come to admitting that I had been hurt by the beating, that my state wasn't the fault of any jinn or spirit. A little while later, Kaka Sati quietly left the room. Mother heaved a deep sigh when she heard the door close. "You will soon feel better, you hear?" she whispered, wiping the now dry concoction from my face with the end of her wrapper. That night was the most peaceful I had enjoyed in my young life. I was happy that I didn't have to see Uncle Usama's face, though I wondered who would get him his bread.



"Curse you, goat! This was my time to shine."

For a whole week after the beating, Mother refused to let me step beyond our quarters. She informed my teacher that I was sick. She said the same thing to Uncle Usama, so he didn't expect me to get his bread or show up for my Arabic lessons. I was visited by many cousins and friends, who kept me company in our sitting room. It was a jolly time for me, that week, as I did what I most enjoyed doing: I reread all my storybooks, including "Nchanga and Enoma" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." Mother made all my favorite dishes: palm-nut soup with lamb, fried plantain and beans, and stewed *taliya*, the heavenly handmade spaghetti, which I shared with the boys and girls who came to visit with me. I asked about Hafiz, and was told that he had decamped to Asawasi, where his maternal grandmother lived, and that no one had seen him since the evening of the beating. How Hafiz had made it to Asawasi, a suburb six miles out of the city, all by himself, nobody knew.

On the sixth day of my confinement, word came to me that Hafiz's grandmother had travelled on foot all the way from Asawasi to plead in person on her grandson's behalf. The old woman knew that unless she showed up Uncle Usama would not withdraw his vow to give his son as many lashes as he had given me. My informants, whom I bribed with the special foods at my disposal, told me that Uncle Usama had sworn in front of the class at the madrassa that, no matter who came to plead, Hafiz, too, would receive his lashes. Uncle had even sworn to whip Hafiz's corpse if he died before receiving his punishment. But Mother didn't believe any of his declarations. She said of him, "Don't mind that liar. He's saying all that just to mask his shame. You wait and see, that useless man is not going to touch the boy."

She must be really mad to call him useless in front of me, I thought. I was

angry, too, but my anger wasn't directed at Uncle, as there was nothing I or anybody could do to stop him from whipping me whenever he was in a bad mood. I was instead angry with Father for being gone all the time and allowing this to happen. I felt bitter that Hafiz had not suffered as I had, yet I didn't want the poor kid to be beaten. Already, Uncle's violent tendencies had turned my cousin into a nervous and subdued child. He stammered and was easily frightened by noises. The kids at school made fun of him. They called him Mad Hafiz, and joked that he was paranoid, or that he saw apparitions. At the time, I didn't really know what paranoid meant, but I suspected that it wasn't a good thing to become.

One day, when Hafiz was seven and I was nine, he had suddenly started talking to himself and to invisible people who seemed to be in his company. Kaka Sati explained to me that jinns were bothering Hafiz and "toying with his mind." While playing with friends, Hafiz would curse and threaten to slap or kick other kids that only he could see. Two days after Hafiz's first paranoid episode, Uncle Usama prepared a special *rubutu* for him to drink and to wash his body with. He also created a powerful talisman inscribed with all the ninety-nine names of Allah. The talisman, sewn in crocodile skin, was given to Hafiz to carry on his body at all times, to help drive away the bad jinns. But, in my own mind, I questioned whether any jinn was truly following Hafiz; I had a feeling that his behavior was a direct result of his constant state of anxiety caused by Uncle's explosive temper. The only good thing about the episode was that Hafiz himself wasn't aware that his schoolmates were mocking him; he seemed to be in a world all his own. Ultimately, whether it was paranoia or jinns, everyone in the family was happy that Uncle Usama's potion and talisman were able to cure Hafiz and bring him back to us. Ever since that time, I had been protective of Hafiz, and prayed that nothing like that would happen to him again.

On the seventh day of my joyful incarceration, Hafiz came to our living quarters during his school lunch break. He told me the story of his gallant escape—how he had walked all the way to his grandmother's house. Hafiz even tried to convince me that Uncle had sent four strong boys after him, "to capture me and bring me to justice, but none of them was any match for my blazing speed." I knew he was exaggerating. But I focussed on another piece of news that he delivered before he went back to school. He informed me that Uncle Usama was out of town on a business trip to Accra, and wouldn't be back until late that evening. I wasn't sure whether to believe him, because everybody knew that Uncle Usama had no business of any kind away from the madrassa. And, on top of that, Uncle hated travelling, and would go years at a time without leaving Kumasi.

But I was so delighted by the news of Uncle's trip that I promptly decided to end my imprisonment. And, by Allah, it felt good to be outside. That evening we played all kinds of games in the front yard. For the first time any of us could remember, we played in a carefree manner, as children are supposed to. And we were so engrossed in our games that we didn't even notice when adults started gathering in the front yard. The women walked in a hurried, distracted manner, some without their veils, pacing back and forth in front of the compound. The crowd grew so large that it resembled a durbar. We noticed the grave looks on the faces of some of the people, and also the secretive manner in which they whispered to one another. Then we heard the sharp, shrill wailing of a woman, crying, reciting in a singsong manner, "*Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un. Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un.*" Knowing what those phrases meant, I froze, and so did every kid around me. The sad and piercing voice of the funeral crier continued, reciting the phrases over and over, and very soon the cries of women and children filled the night air.

I was in the company of Hafiz and five other cousins when this started. We ran to a corner of the front yard, where other kids had gathered, still clueless as to who the dead person was. The adults whispered about a car accident on the road from Accra to Kumasi. It suddenly dawned on me that Uncle Usama's trip was to Accra, and that it would take the death of someone as influential as he was on Zongo Street to attract such a large group to our compound. But Uncle Usama cannot die, I thought. He is too powerful.

I never found out exactly how Uncle Usama died. All I heard was what was whispered that night about a violent car accident.

Our front yard swarmed with mourners, some weeping like children, others consoling the weepers, and the rest loudly reciting verses from the Quran, in memoriam to Uncle Usama. I looked at Hafiz, whose face had a blank expression, as if he didn't know whose death had been announced. I didn't cry, either. I watched as kids even younger than I was cried hysterically, as if they knew what death really meant. But, for some reason, I felt no emotion at all. If anything, I felt guilty, because we were taught at the madrassa to not, under any circumstance, speak or think ill of the dead, even if they were one's worst enemies in life. We were taught to pray for the deceased, to ask for Allah's forgiveness on their behalf, to beg for Allah's mercy to allow them entry into *al-janna* on the Day of Judgment. With that in my mind, I put aside the bitter feelings I had carried all week.

"Allah have mercy on him," I repeated quietly. And immediately I began to cry, as if those words had broken the barrier holding back my tears. When Hafiz saw me cry, he, too, began to wail, though there were no tears in his eyes. We hugged and cried until Grandmother Sati sent an aunt to bring us to her quarters. "The angels respond only to prayers, not tears, so stop crying and pray for him," she said rather stoically. But each time I looked at Hafiz tears rolled down my cheeks again. "Allah have mercy," I repeated, though deep in the pit of my stomach I felt that my cries and prayers were meant not for Uncle Usama but for Hafiz. For Allah to have mercy and keep the jinns away from my cousin, as Uncle Usama would not be around to defeat them the next time they tried to steal Hafiz from us. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Mohammed Naseehu Ali on life in zongos.

BOOKS

AROUND AND AROUND

You say you want a revolution. But what counts as one, anyway?

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

In June, 2018, the political commentator Fareed Zakaria found himself in the Campo de' Fiori, in the center of Rome, with Steve Bannon, who was then President Trump's chief strategist. Bannon—whom Zakaria describes as a "volatile personality" and as a conduit for the international resurgence of nativist sentiment—had come to Italy to help convince two populist parties, one on the left and the other on the right, that their interests were aligned. He drew Zakaria's attention to a monument to Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century poet and cosmologist who held Copernican views about the universe and was burned at the stake for heresy. Where Galileo sold out and recanted, Bannon explained, Bruno was a real hero. Zakaria was surprised by Bannon's admiration for Bruno, who is widely regarded as a progressive, proto-Enlightenment figure. But Bannon was less interested in the substance of Bruno's opinions than in his uncompromising defiance. It was Bannon's conviction, Zakaria writes, "that in times of turmoil, take-no-prisoners radicalism is the only option."

In his new book, "Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash from 1600 to the Present" (Norton), Zakaria concedes the turmoil but resists the radicalism. Everywhere you look, he says, you can see dramatic change. The rules-based international order has been destabilized. Traditional left-right divides have been transfigured. The trade-friendly economic consensus of the post-Communist era has yielded to protectionism and autarky. Given that we may be living through "one of the most revolutionary ages in history," he thinks that lessons can be drawn from previous revolutionary ages, especially those that involved actual revolutions.

The concept of revolution, Zakaria notes, is a slippery thing. How is it that Bannon, of all people, identifies himself as a revolutionary? Zakaria finds the problem embedded in the word itself. "Revolution" was originally employed to describe the orbital movement of a celestial body around a fixed axis. A full revolution is completed by returning to a starting point. But before long the word acquired a secondary meaning, designating a rupture that renders everything utterly different. The word now refers at once to predictability and to transformation. "Revolution" is hardly the only word that contains its opposite—"to sanction" and "to dust" are similar in that way—but in this particular case Zakaria sees something profound. Revolutions contain the seeds of their own undoing: "Radical advance is followed by backlash and a yearning for a past golden age imagined as simple, ordered, and pure."

Taken to its logical conclusion, this idea would represent a cyclical idea of history—a fatalist notion that has recently found favor among conservatives. Zakaria believes that we can and do make progress. But he is wary of the assumption that history tends to move in the direction of ever-greater human flourishing, a Whiggish view he associates with such frustrated optimists as Steven Pinker. Zakaria's book represents an attempt to distinguish between revolutions that have inspired thermostatic reactions and revolutions that have endured.

The most auspicious models, Zakaria suggests, might be found in the Netherlands and in England. In the sixteenth century, all of Europe was confronted with a series of economic, technological, and social shocks: the globalization spurred by the Age of Exploration, the innovations that emerged from war and from the necessity of economic expansion, and a "radical *identity revolution*" driven by the Protestant Reformation. After most of the Netherlands threw off Habsburg rule, in 1579, the Dutch formed a republic that capitalized on these changes. For reasons of geography, they were accustomed to diffuse authority. The need to reclaim land from the sea, and the collective action required to do so, Zakaria explains, had insured that feudal centralization never took hold: "People had to work together to get anything done." Technological development, in the form of windmills and dikes, was a necessity for survival, and precocious urbanization provided an infrastructure for industry and trade. The cultural shift to Protestantism encouraged freethinking. Finance was democratized in the form of the world's first stock exchange, and the leaders of the republic were wise enough to ally themselves with the country's commercial interests.

The Netherlands might have been early to liberalize, but that didn't mean it was exempt from what Zakaria describes as the "familiar story" of reaction: "rapid advancement, dislocation, and then a wave of conjured memories of a lost golden age." The Dutch Republic was split between the economic dynamism of tolerant coastal technocrats

ABOVE: TIM LAHAN

Revolutions in the name of liberty or equality, some historians urge, must be situated within longer, incremental processes.

ILLUSTRATION BY LEIGH GULDIG

and the atavistic impulses of more conservative rural populations that had been left behind by liberal merchants and bankers. The country's Golden Age came to an end in 1672, when the French invaded. A version of liberalism, in the form of a young William of Orange, nevertheless survived and, sixteen years later, was ported across the Channel to lead a constitutional monarchy. England, like the Netherlands, was prepared to make a seamless transition to a liberal dispensation. The brilliance of England's Glorious Revolution, Zakaria thinks, lay in the collaboration of the country's Whig and Tory élites in a "*bipartisan* escape from dangerous polarization," and in their agreement that "English prosperity defined the national interest, not dynastic glory or religious zeal."

A good revolution, as Zakaria tells it, is not initiated by political actors. It occurs when exogenous shocks—in the form of economic or technological trends—are tamed by competent management. Liberalism flourished in the Netherlands and England because revolution was a "bottom-up process" in those countries. When Dutch and English leaders saw fit to intervene in the course of human affairs, they were content merely "to implement, confirm, and codify the transformations that had *already* taken place in society, beneath the surface of politics." These revolutions succeeded insofar as they were scarcely needed. A good revolution respects the limits of natural forces. A bad revolution crosses a line and provokes the backlash necessary to maintain equilibrium. Zakaria's counterexample to the Netherlands and England is France, whose revolution was a "grisly failure" insofar as revolutionary élites "tried to impose modernity and enlightenment by top-down decree on a country that was largely unready for it." The Reign of Terror and the consolidation of power under Napoleon, Zakaria says, prove that social change "must take place organically."

Zakaria's descriptions of revolutionary activity make a great din—when things aren't "plunging" or "soaring," they have "skyrocketed" or "ricocheted"—but his evocations of historical inflection points feel dutiful and formulaic. They are also confusing. After a while, one can't help but wonder what Zakaria means by "revolution." What he calls the "Dutch revolution" seems to refer to the entirety of the country's Golden Age, which lasted about ninety years and ended with the republic's abrupt decline. We're invited, with fine illogic, to compare the success of the Industrial Revolution with the failure of the French Revolution, even though a failed industrial revolution would be no industrial revolution at all. He identifies the English Revolution with the Glorious Revolution, treating decades of bloodletting and repression as mere prelude to a crowning moment of liberal reconciliation. By this reasoning, one might claim that the Russian Revolution culminated in glasnost.

Nor is it clear what Zakaria means by "top-down" or "bottom-up." The French Revolution failed because the élites tried to force top-down change, but the Glorious Revolution—which might better be described as a coup by Dutch commercial interests—somehow reflected a wise acquiescence to bottom-up processes. The specifics of revolutionary activity seem of secondary interest. Zakaria takes solace in the fact that civilization seems able to heal itself. The revolutions of 1848, for example, may have been "crushed" by societies mired in primordial autocracy, but everything that they hoped to enact—the proliferation of human freedoms—was "almost invariably adopted through gradual reform." The implication is that

what the vanguard struggled to achieve by fiat was going to happen anyway. All they had to do was sit tight.

Most revolutions have, at one point or another, had their revolutionary credentials challenged. Events that purportedly failed to rise to the radical occasion include the English Revolution (merely a bid for bourgeois power, skeptics say), the Mexican Revolution (a rivalry between warlords), and even the French Revolution. The American Revolution is a recurring example. At the time, it seemed as though an awful lot changed after 1776; in retrospect, many things in fact remained the same. Some historians have introduced further distinctions without introducing further clarity. The colonists' struggle against the British, it has been suggested, qualified as a political revolution but did not meet the criteria for a social revolution. This, however, is just a restatement of the observation that the same set of historical episodes might, with equal plausibility, be described from one point of view as continuous and from another as a break. The word "revolution" may be perfectly useful as a compliment we pay to inflection points for developments that are, by consensus, important. But the attempt to provide a load-bearing definition might be more trouble than it's worth.

In "The Age of Revolutions: And the Generations Who Made It" (Basic), Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, a professor of history at the University of Southern California, offers what he calls an "anti-exceptionalist history of the age of revolution." In his view, there is an alternative way to understand why the great transatlantic revolutions that straddled the turn of the nineteenth century—in the United States, France, Haiti, and Latin America—are often said to have "failed." Unlike Zakaria, Perl-Rosenthal doesn't really believe that counter-revolutionary or illiberal reversals prove that the early revolutionaries were overweening. He argues, instead, that the degree to which these revolutions met (or did not meet) their egalitarian aims should be understood in the light of processes that took a full generation to unfold. In 1972, Henry Kissinger asked the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, what he thought of the French Revolution. Zhou is said to have responded that it was "too early to tell." (The story apparently turns on a miscommunication—Zhou was probably referring to the events of 1968 rather than those of 1789—but it persists for a reason.) Perl-Rosenthal doesn't go that far, but, like a professor who generously grants extensions before grading, he thinks that revolutionary fervor can be assessed only as the spark of a longer undertaking.

Perl-Rosenthal's book follows several members of what he calls the first

generation of "gentlemen revolutionaries": his cast includes famous political actors such as John Adams; less well-known but influential women such as Maria Rivadeneyra, a prioress in Peru, and Marie Bunel, a merchant in Haiti; and more run-of-the-mill figures like France's Louis-Augustin Bosc, now best known for the pears that bear his name. Perl-Rosenthal believes that these figures had considerable difficulties "overcoming the hierarchical reflexes of the mid-eighteenth-century Atlantic old regime in which they had grown up." Theirs was a largely closed world of intimate relationships and norms opaque to outsiders. Their social attitudes made it difficult for them to forge alliances beyond their station.

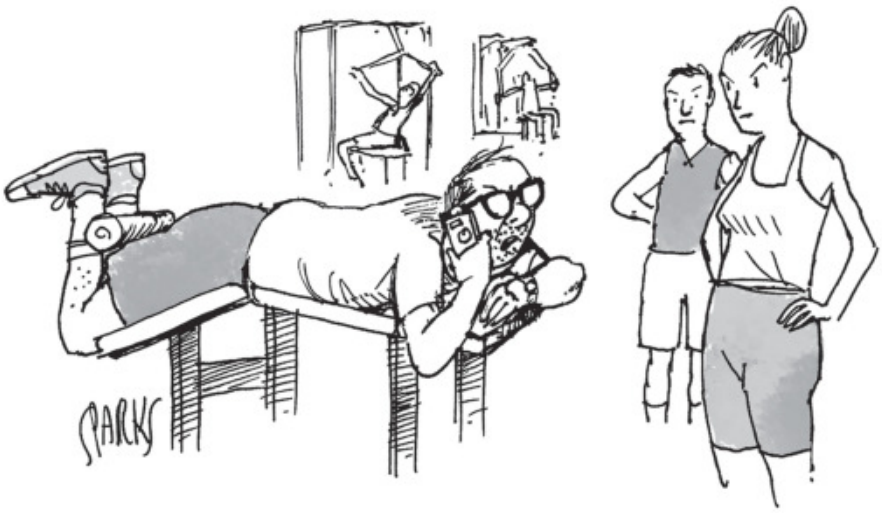
Take Rivadeneyra, who presided over a convent in Cuzco, Peru, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Her ancestors had come to South America with Francisco Pizarro, and she was raised in luxury as part of the imperial colony's criollo élite. She liked ballads sung from balconies and farces performed in the evenings. Her skirts were inlaid with mother-of-pearl medallions, and she took chocolate for breakfast. In 1780, a member of the native nobility, Túpac Amaru, launched a revolt against the Spanish. At the time, Perl-Rosenthal notes, it was easy to imagine that the interests of the natives and those of the criollos might be united against an extractive empire. Rivadeneyra herself seems to have considered the possibility of such an alliance. In the end, however, she and her family led a defense of Cuzco that turned the war against Amaru, who was executed.

Rivadeneyra, like the other figures of Perl-Rosenthal's first revolutionary generation, "never lost sight of the interests of her caste." But even if she had given freer rein to her sympathy with the rebellious natives, Perl-Rosenthal argues, the two worlds were simply too far apart for such a political confederation to be realized. He is a careful reader of personal letters, attentive to the codes of polite salutation that marked the worthiness of a correspondent. His principals had sparse experience with the cultivation of cross-class coalitions, and there was no social infrastructure that might have afforded them opportunities to learn. Hereditary inequality was too great. The coalitions that did emerge were held together weakly—by the mere agreement among individuals that what they wanted was "not this"—or they arose by default. The wealthiest people were risk-averse because they had a lot to lose; the poorest people were risk-averse because they couldn't afford to lose the little they had.

Insurrectionary outbreaks were thus almost random. Perl-Rosenthal takes as one example the storming of the Bastille. "The working classes in Paris, conditioned by decades of increasingly separate living, had a remarkable capacity for self-organization," he writes. "Yet the same social realities that had made them effective self-organizers also defined the horizon of their political vision." The dark, crenellated fortress of the Bastille seemed like a reasonable target. It just looked like a place that deserved storming. And it was, if only symbolically, which is why we remember it. As a strategic objective, however, the Bastille—which housed nothing of royal or military importance—left something to be desired. The crowd's unfamiliarity with which sanctum actually mattered, Perl-Rosenthal says, "spurred action against places and people who did not in fact have much power to meet their demands." This miscalculation wasn't the protesters' fault; they had no way to obtain the right information or to develop the proper alliances.

In Perl-Rosenthal's telling, the revolutions on the other side of the Atlantic followed a similar script. The social stratification of the pre-revolutionary era, in each case, provided little room for egalitarianism. The United States Constitution was "the product of a successful revolution from above," he writes. "The Constitutional Convention itself was a virtual coup by the elite against the existing government." Something comparable happened in Haiti. Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, was born into slavery, but even as a freedman he remained a product of a hierarchical world. Although this revolution had "begun as a revolt from below," Louverture "tried to transform it into a revolution from above," falling into what one recent biographer has described as an "authoritarian spiral." In his attempts to protect the nascent country's independence, he was perfectly willing to send the masses back to their plantations, in a condition of near-bondage. Élites acted this way because they were certain that only they could know what was best for everyone.

But this was a generational limitation, and it eroded with time. If such men as John Adams and Toussaint Louverture could only imagine rearranging the game pieces, Perl-Rosenthal says, they nevertheless enabled their successors to upend the board: "They had managed to irretrievably fracture the old regime. Out of the disarray, new people and new kinds of politics were beginning to emerge." As classes started to



"Let me call you from a different machine."

• •

mix, movements became broader and more heterogeneous. When the United States' capital moved to Washington, D.C., elected officials and other élites had no choice but to room and drink with men of the lower orders. In the provinces, the seventeen-nineties saw the coalescence of the Republican Party, which took shape as "a mass organization that united elite and working-class voters." Drinking together led to durable institutions that advanced more equitable forms of mobilization, expanding the franchise, and political participation more generally, beyond property owners. In Latin America, solidarity movements succeeded in an extended campaign for independence from the Spanish crown, though, as Perl-Rosenthal notes, the revolutionary results frequently assumed an illiberal cast. In Haiti, the militarized coercion of the Louverture era and its immediate successors coalesced into a pattern of one-man rule, even as the country's development was hamstrung by punitive foreign debts.

As a piece of scholarship, Perl-Rosenthal's book is a persuasive and inspired contribution to perennial historical debates. Was the American Revolution a project of radical egalitarianism, or was it simply a transfer of élite power? Was the French Revolution stymied by external forces of reaction, or was it fundamentally illiberal to begin with? His response is that we should not limit our gaze to "supposedly sharp turning points and dramatic transformations" but instead narrate the past as a series of successive and intertwined campaigns to improve our estate. Perl-Rosenthal's book is written for a general readership, and he makes the further case that the stakes of this enterprise extend beyond those of scholarship: "Buying into this fantasy of instantaneous revolution has significant consequences—most damagingly, a potential loss of faith in the possibilities of change if the transformation fails to arrive as quickly as expected."

It's little wonder that our current political climate—in which the stagnation and senescence at the top can feel disconnected from agitation and ferment below—has called forth treatises on revolutionary ages. Electrifying visions of the future seem in short supply. As the writer and historian Steve Fraser put it in a recent essay for the magazine *Jacobin*, the right and the left have settled on competing calls not for revolution but for restoration. Both Zakaria and Perl-Rosenthal want to shore up our faith in transformative incrementalism, the idea that we might extricate ourselves from this mess by putting one foot in front of the other.

Zakaria's book concludes that revolutions fail when they're visited on societies that are unprepared to adapt to new conditions. He has little to say about what kinds of outcomes might be desirable, but much to say about what we should not do. He is very concerned about the rise of identity politics. Although he opens his book with the Bannon anecdote, he implies that men like Bannon aren't worth worrying about, and are best seen as a reaction engendered by an overreaching left. In a 2022 opinion piece for the Washington *Post*, Zakaria suggested that the problem with the Democratic Party was that it was too concerned with pronouns.

A fixation on contemporary identity politics helps explain his assessment of revolutionary precedents. The Glorious Revolution was good because the conservative and liberal élites of the time agreed to stop harping on religious differences and focus instead on economic commonalities. Their French counterparts a century later failed to heed this lesson: the Reign of Terror, he says, "shows how appeals to exclusive categories of identity can easily get out of control. When everyone is either a patriot or a traitor, heads will roll." Technological lurches, such as the rise of artificial intelligence, are scary, but the social order can be preserved, and the pendular threat of "backlash" staved off, as long as politicians do not use identity to pander to anxious constituencies: "Where politics was once overwhelmingly shaped by economics, politics today is being transformed by identity."

This may be an untenable distinction. Economic interests are not simply waiting to be revealed. They're mediated through social identity, and that's true even of political groups defined overtly through economic relations. (As the historian E. P. Thompson put it, "The working class made itself as much as it was made.") If economics directly shaped politics, people like Maria Rivadeneyra would have allied themselves with the natives against the Spanish. Those common interests had to be constructed, made socially legible, through a process of trial and error.

In this respect, Perl-Rosenthal's book can be taken as a story of how novel forms of solidarity became available to a post-revolutionary generation. This new cohort was no longer in thrall to the old regimes' social structures. What the first generation broke, in his account, the second generation was able to piece back together more deliberately. An abatement of inequality created the occasion to gather and make trade-offs. These trade-offs required sustained personal interactions among heterogeneous groups that scarcely existed in an earlier era, further reducing inequality. This was not a matter of giving up on "identity politics" but a matter of reshuffling, and expanding, the kinds of identities that mattered. Perl-Rosenthal suggests that, in the early decades of the United States, the Republican Party afforded a mechanism for a more capacious national self-image, one that could encompass both élites and commoners. With the tumult of the American Revolution behind them, the longing for freedom in theory gave way to the administration of particular freedoms in practice.

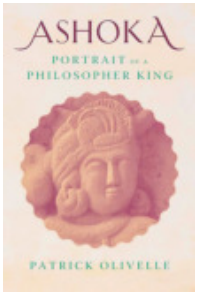
Those freedoms were, needless to say, unevenly distributed, which is one of the reasons that some critics have written off the American Revolution. At the end of Perl-Rosenthal's introduction, he suggests that his "anti-exceptionalist" story of revolutions might put to rest the notion that the American Revolution was "distinctively tainted by the patriot movement's imbrication with slavery and racism." His primary reference here seems to be the *Times Magazine's* 1619 Project, with its charge that the putative egalitarianism of the Framers was little more than a lie. What this interpretation leaves out, according to Perl-Rosenthal, is that *all* the transatlantic revolutions began to unfold at an accelerating pace as the initial revolutionary vanguard was swept aside. By our lights, it is monstrous that this branching egalitarianism remained racist and exclusionary, and that freedom for some entailed the perpetuation of violent bondage for others. But there was nothing singular about this compromise. After all, Haiti freed the en-

slaved but maintained a system of plantation agriculture that was virtually indistinguishable from slavery. Contemporary activists on the left like to quote Emma Lazarus and Maya Angelou to the effect that none of us are free until all of us are free. This is lovely as an aspirational ideal and powerful as an exhortation, but it should not be mistaken for an empirical claim. Perl-Rosenthal's book shows in detail how some people achieved a measure of freedom while others remained in chains. The "we" of "We the people" represented an expansion of the circle of moral concern; it took, and will take, a lot more work to expand that circle further.

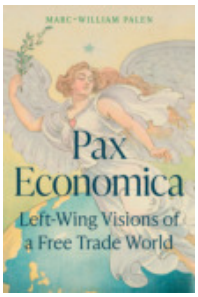
If we act in good faith to "reckon in this way with the pervasive illiberalism of the revolutionary era," Perl-Rosenthal offers, this discussion might "point to an exit from today's heated debates" about the rot at the core of our nation's founding. It could replace the low hum of mutual suspicion—and the fantasy that a true revolution can come only at the hands of the morally pure—with a renewed commitment to the unglamorous work of political organization. His emphasis on the logistics of solidarity reminds us that moral advances are neither a salutary by-product of economics or technology, as Zakaria seems to think, nor a matter of progressive inevitability.

Still, the analytic edge of Perl-Rosenthal's account, like Zakaria's, is blunted by its central historical category. The concept of revolution, especially in contrast to mere reform, conveys an exhilaration that's hard to relinquish. Yet it's worrying when an argument places weight, as Zakaria's does, on an honorific that encompasses both the removal of Louis XVI and the widespread adoption of steam power. Perl-Rosenthal does his best to preserve something productive in the idea of a grand event that requires a generational shift to fructify. But this scheme, he seems to concede, makes much more sense in the case of the United States than it ever did in Peru or in Haiti. The halting progress he describes so well could just as easily be portrayed as the result of distinct campaigns, rather than as belated aspects of a dramatic and all-encompassing movement. Perhaps the most revolutionary step we could take would be to relax our grip on "revolution" itself. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

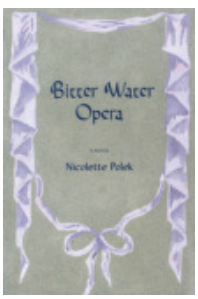


Ashoka, *by Patrick Olivelle (Yale)*. This incisive biography aims to separate the historical Ashoka, who ruled a vast swath of the Indian subcontinent in the third century B.C., from the one of legend. Ashoka is commonly described as "the Buddhist ruler of India," but in Olivelle's rendering he is a ruler "who happened to be a Buddhist," and whose devoutness was only a single aspect of a "unique and unprecedented" system of governance. Ashoka sought to unite a religiously diverse, polyglot people; his most radical innovation, Olivelle shows, was the "dharma community," a top-down effort to give his subjects "a sense of belonging to the same moral empire."



Pax Economica, *by Marc-William Palen (Princeton)*. A comprehensive account of the modern free-trade movement and a timely act of historical reclamation, this book illuminates the forgotten legacy of left-wing advocacy for liberalized markets. Palen, a historian, reveals the movement's origins to be internationalist and cosmopolitan, led by socialists, pacifists, and feminists, who viewed expanded trade as the only practical way to achieve lasting peace in a newly globalized world. This fresh perspective complicates contemporary political archetypes of neoliberal free marketeers and "Made in America" populists, adding valuable context to our often overly simplistic economic discourse.

Here in Avalon, *by Tara Isabella Burton (Simon & Schuster)*. Dreams of escaping the mundane animate this fairy-tale-inflected thriller set in contemporary New York. The novel's action centers on Cecilia, a flighty "seeker" whose mercurial bent leads her to abandon a new marriage, ditch her sister, Rose, and take up with a cultish, seafaring cabaret troupe that recruits lonely souls with the promise "Another life is possible." Soon, Rose embarks on a mission to find Cecilia, blowing up her own relationship and career to follow her sister into a world of "time travelers" who tell "elegantly anachronistic riddles," lionize unrequited love, and live to "preserve the magic." Exploring the bond between the markedly different siblings, Burton examines their life styles—the bourgeois and the bohemian, the materialistic and the artistic—through a whimsical lens.



Bitter Water Opera, *by Nicolette Polek (Graywolf)*. Gia, the narrator of this début novella, is disenchanted with the modern world. She's a film scholar whose long-term relationship is crumbling; in the rubble, she finds a new obsession, a dancer and recluse named Marta, who retreated to the desert in order to perform on her own terms, and who mysteriously appears after Gia writes to her. Of Marta, Gia thinks, "This was the kind of woman I thought I would be. Alone and powerful with creation." With Marta's help, Gia can find transcendence in everyday life again—in "miry water" and "wiry greenery, coiling"; in a beetle's "thin, metallic sounds"; even in the taste of "strawberry-flavored melatonin." Polek elegantly fashions an ode to small and privately felt moments of beauty, and to art's capacity to reach through time.

BALLPARKING IT

When America's pastime was New York's.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Players like the pitcher Christy Mathewson were legendary figures.

Of all the arenas gone from New York, there are two that a sports-obsessed New Yorker may regret most never having seen. One is the old Madison Square Garden, with its Saint-Gaudens statue of Diana dancing on the skyline, and its memorable murder, when, in 1906, Evelyn Nesbit's deranged husband shot and killed the architect Stanford White. The other is the Polo Grounds on 155th Street and Eighth Avenue, with its one-of-a-kind horseshoe shape, its oddly rural placement within Coogan's Bluff, and a dramatic death of its own, when, fourteen years after the White murder, Carl Mays struck and killed Ray Chapman with an inside pitch, still the only on-field death of a player in the history of major-league baseball. There are other places it would have been nice to see: notably, Ebbets Field, in Brooklyn, the home of the Dodgers until they were snatched by Los Angeles. But Ebbets at least has had its façade and some of its dimensions replicated in today's CitiField, which Fred Wilpon built, the way moguls can, as a monument to his Brooklyn-baseball boyhood.

But the Polo Grounds uptown still touches hearts while having truly disappeared. Jimmy Breslin, in a fine new collection just published by Library of America, conjures the childhood memory of seeing the green park in the gray city: "I start squeezing and pushing through these men because the moment I get near the top of the subway stairs I can look around and see the ballpark, the Polo Grounds . . . and for me that was the best part of the whole day at a baseball game, coming up the subway stairs and seeing the park for the first time." The Polo Grounds holds our hearts in part because in photographs it still looks so *weird*. Staring at an antique panoramic picture of the great pitcher Christy Mathewson on the mound in 1913, one can hardly believe how bathtub-shaped the stadium is, how close the right-field bleachers, how wildly distant deep center, how high the overhanging porch. Damon Runyon, writing in 1911, exclaimed, "The Polo Grounds! It means the Big Town; it means the Big City Club; it is all the lights of Broadway and the lure of Gotham summed up in two words. . . . It is a place of surpassing magnificence, sparkling beneath the silver sun like a great green jewel, and best of all, it is the abiding place of the Giants!" One notices that Runyon seems indifferent to how bizarre an anachronism the name was for a baseball stadium—it's a holdover from an earlier, failed life with the horsey set—and also that newspaper copy editors were much kinder to the beautiful semicolon than they are today. When Yankee Stadium opened, a few years later, Runyon treated it more cynically, as an outsized commercial venture that might or might not work.

Glory! Romance! We can't help elevating our experience of games into the epic realm. The cartoonist Randall Munroe, the creator of the comic "xkcd," once had his stick figures decide that they would use the output of a weighted random-number generator to build narratives; "All Sports Commentary" was the caption. True enough. Kevin Baker, in "The New York Game: Baseball and the Rise of a New City" (Knopf), tells stories about the development of baseball, many of them involving the Polo Grounds, and, as with earlier baseball bards, the narratives come complete with morals. But his have a harder, more disabused edge than the familiar sporting sort. The gentle haze that lay over the legendary history book "The Glory of Their Times" (1966), which was edited by Lawrence Ritter and which covered

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM BETTMANN / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL ROGERS

much of the same territory, here evaporates under the brighter sun of candor and confession. We get sharper engravings of brutal exploitation and raw appetite, with the team owners mostly favoring the first and the players mostly favoring the second.

Baker's point, doubtless annoying to fans elsewhere, is that the rise of baseball as we know it was centered in Gotham, the one place where the necessary density of big money, large stadiums, daily tabloids, and assorted crooks could remake the game from "base ball," the nineteenth-century country (and soldier-camp) sport it had been, to "baseball," the big business it became. Baker therefore takes on the familiar role of the hardboiled Gotham reporter, maintaining a knowing "Let me dry you out behind the ears, kid" tone throughout. And so the tale of how the Giants established themselves at the Polo Grounds is told, accurately enough, as a piece of complicated capitalist skulduggery in which the team's desperate owner bought a controlling interest in the Baltimore Orioles and then dragged its stars north. (It is useful to be reminded, for those fans still mourning the loss of the Dodgers to L.A., that New York baseball, too, was made by greedy wanderers coming to a growing town.) Baker also details how Hilltop Park, the first home of the Highlanders—an American League team that, in the nineteentens, would become the Yankees—was developed and leased by a rogues' gallery of Tammany politicians and cops, hidden, in the classic Mob move, behind a figurehead owner.

Yet Baker, an iconoclast by temperament, is a mythologist by vocation. Someone writing about sports has to have a taste for myth, or else it all dissolves into numbers. So Babe Ruth gets the same Rabelaisian introduction that he has received since the nineteen-twenties, except that the stories are franker and the words ruder: "The Babe liked to eat and drink and fuck, too, even if he wasn't big on reading. . . . The Babe was said to have rented out entire whorehouses on the road for a night; the ladies revived him for another round by pouring champagne over his head."

Baker's account of Christy Mathewson, who, starting in 1900, pitched seventeen seasons for the Giants, is more worshipful—all the revisionists in the world can't shake the legend of Mathewson as a captain of men and a gentleman of integrity. (Umpires were said to consult Matty on close calls, trusting that his honest eye would be keener than his club loyalty.) But Baker grasps that Mathewson's was a deliberately willed and crafted persona, one that enabled him "to be a magnet to the fans . . . without provoking the jealousy and suspicion of teammates." And he shrewdly points out that, though Joe DiMaggio and Derek Jeter both learned to adopt this mask with minimal slippage, Reggie Jackson and Alex Rodriguez, equally big stars, were unable to do so, to their detriment. In Runyon's Big Town, you have to be a fine gentleman *and* a regular guy. Baker finds a wonderful quote in which Matty discusses the importance of having what he called "an alibi": "You must have an alibi to show why you lost. If you haven't one, you must fake one. Your self-confidence must be maintained." Baker rightly connects this remark to Ring Lardner's great comic story "Alibi Ike," certainly the single funniest baseball story ever written, which we can now see provides a mock-heroic version of something actually heroic: a great baseball player's imperturbable façade.

Mathewson's opposite number, Hal Chase—a brilliant first baseman and a compulsive gambler, who did more than anyone to bring the corruption of betting to the game—is just as vivid and demonic here as he has been in earlier tellings. Chase and Matty ended up playing together on the 1916 Cincinnati Reds, in a collision that has the inevitability of tragedy and that would have made a fine film for, say, Tom Hanks as Matty and Tommy Lee Jones as Chase. Before long, Mathewson discovered his new teammate's predilections, and had him suspended. When Mathewson was in retirement and ailing (he'd been accidentally gassed during military training exercises in 1918 and subsequently contracted tuberculosis), he was practically the only member of the baseball establishment to catch the scent of what the sports gamblers were up to.

Though the teams involved in the great World Series fix of 1919 were from Chicago and Cincinnati, the scheme was, in essence, a local game, too, rooted in New York gangsterism—in particular, in Arnold Rothstein's gambling empire. Baker notes that the Chicago White Sox players put out the word that they were "for sale" only after years of mistreatment by Charlie Comiskey, the team's owner. Soon they were inundated with offers. Then Rothstein, after first apparently making an ostentatious public show of denouncing all such cheating, decided to finance the fix. (He used his public rejection of the scheme as another kind of "alibi.") Watching the series, Mathewson circled the suspicious plays in red on his scorecard. No one wanted to believe it, not even Mathewson. Only when the scandal blew up the following year was it clear that his unease had been well founded.

Chase, to be sure, ended up forlorn and alone. "I'm the loser," he said on his deathbed. Mathewson had died two decades earlier, saying to his wife, in one of the most touching of American farewells, "It's nearly over. I know it, and we must face it. Go out and have a good cry. Don't make it a long one." From Homer's Hector on out, heroes take a familiar shape.

Baker is both up to date and persuasive in his treatment of nonwhite players and teams in the city. Curiously, Native Americans were accepted as ballplayers and athletes from early on; Charles Bender and John Meyers, of Ojibwa and Cahuilla ancestry, respectively, and both called "Chief," were major stars in the early nineteen-hundreds. But, for Black players, the "color line," despite some brief stabs at breaking it, was absolute, and the myths on which generations were raised were bereft of essential truth. The tale of how Jackie Robinson, with the backing of the Dodgers' general manager Branch Rickey, integrated major-league baseball was inspiring gospel for generations of American liberals. In "Portnoy's Complaint," Philip Roth's narrator explains that his father was kept well below the executive level of the New Jersey insurance firm he worked for not simply because he was Jewish but also because, with

his eighth-grade education, he "wasn't exactly suited to be the Jackie Robinson of the insurance business"—and Roth could be sure that everyone would get the admiring joke.

Yet, well before Robinson's arrival, the Negro Leagues were *already* major league, in the simple sense that, had there been a World Series between a team from the Negro Leagues and one from the white leagues, either could have won. The story of how Robinson braved bigotry to break the color line is heroic, but it shouldn't distract from the cruel absurdity of there having been a color line to be broken. Baker makes the reasonable case that the Negro Leagues' Lincoln Giants, with its short-lived offshoot, the Lincoln Stars, was "one of the greatest New York teams ever assembled, in any sport." Among its players was Oscar Charleston, who, by increasing consensus, is considered one of the four or five finest center fielders ever to play the game. But the Lincolns played at Olympic Field, which Baker describes as "a small crude long forgotten park" in northern Manhattan, and later at the Catholic Protectory Oval, a still more obscure park, built for an orphanage in the Bronx.

Baker is also very good on the extraordinary story of the entrepreneur Alex Pompez and his New York Cubans. Pompez, who represented himself as a cigar tycoon, in fact made his fortune in the numbers racket. He assembled the first great team of Latino players but initially imposed an ethnic barrier of his own, excluding Black American players and arousing protests from the Eastern Colored League. The petty cruelties of American racism are a permanently depressing subject.

Baseball in New York was also a well-written sport. Though Baker pays attention to the role of the New York newspapers in creating a city of baseball, and he quotes from Runyon, he rather condescends to the sports pages of the early era, as amounting to so much "ballyhoo." ("In other words, hoopla, hype, publicity, *press*. New York was the world capital of it.") In his account, the papers and the writers are something of a Greek chorus, helping narrate the action but not sharply personified as individual voices.

Yet a reasonable case can be made that two essential manners in American prose—the laconic, tight-lipped style (Hemingway began as a newspaperman and sportswriter, too) and the loquacious high irony that A. J. Liebling passed on to Tom Wolfe—began in the baseball stories of the New York papers. The sportswriters were there to *write*, in ways that the other people on the paper weren't. Here's Runyon on a single play in a single game:

> This is the way old "Casey" Stengel ran yesterday afternoon, running his home run home.
>
> This is the way old "Casey" Stengel ran, running his home run home to a Giant victory by a score of 5 to 4 in the first game of the World Series of 1923.
>
> This is the way old "Casey" Stengel ran, running his home run home, when two were out in the ninth inning and the score was tied and the ball was still bounding inside the Yankee yard.
>
> This is the way—
>
> His mouth wide open.
>
> His warped old legs bending beneath him at every stride.

Old Casey Stengel is a hero, even if the author is aware that this is just a contest being played for money by men of dubious honor and tawdry appetites. Runyon knew that these two things were true: the contests were epic in the enjoyment they provided, and they were miniature in their importance. This practice, of remaining close to the field but also distanced from it, evolved into the smooth, smilingly detached narratives of such writers as Red Smith and Liebling. This magazine's own Roger Angell shifted that mode into unapologetic fandom, in which the point was not to be an insider at all but to watch from a perspective as bemused and engaged as that of Henry James watching Daisy Miller—empathy without undue explication. Philip Roth used to say that listening to Dodgers games as a boy, with the eloquent Southerner Red Barber narrating the adventures of the Brooklyn Bums, taught him more about the power of point of view than any English class did. You could write that way about other things than baseball, but baseball was a good thing to write that way about.

Is the romance of baseball in New York coming to an end? The anchoring of sports in community seems further and further away, and the modern American curse of a capitalism that makes people feel miserable without visibly immiserating them affects sports just as it does everything else. One turns back to the real question: Why do we care? Why can the narration of these long-lost and in themselves insignificant contests still enliven our imaginations? Confucius says—an old-fashioned locution, perhaps, but appropriate here—

never to take interest in feats of strength. And, in the main, we don't. Sports are an artificial, deliberately narrowed activity that we create, in order to have moralizing stories to tell. If we didn't have the legend of Christy Mathewson or Willie Mays, if we ascribed to such men merely feats of strength and speed rather than ebulliences of character, we would be bored.

There are passions that have to be private to be felt, and others that have to be communal to be real. Making up morality tales about small differences in physical performances is as necessary a human occupation as offering wildly differing rewards on the basis of equally minute differences in physical appearance: he's a god, she's an angel, he's a star. We live within our bodies and honor them by admiring ones nimbler than our own. There seems no way out or up from this preoccupation. It gets its grace by becoming common.

The strength of our moralizing instinct is shown in the vindictive nature of our assessments of right and wrong in sports. We've kept Shoeless Joe out of the Hall of Fame, for the same reason that we've kept out Pete Rose and Roger Clemens and Barry Bonds, even as we recognize inconsistencies in these judgments. Pete Rose's sin—betting on baseball—is scarcely a sin at all for those outside the game, but it is rightly a capital offense for those within it. We accept the inequity of banning Shoeless Joe for having helped throw the 1919 World Series while enshrining the White Sox owner Charlie Comiskey, even though it was Comiskey's greed and stinginess that pushed Shoeless Joe to take the gamblers' money. We may recognize that the ban on performance-enhancing substances is hypocritical—pretty much everything that an athlete takes is in some way "performance enhancing." Yet it is the cost of the activity to the nonparticipants that makes us rebel. The cost of corruption is the cost it imposes on those who would rather not partake in it.

We want clean games because games are so valuable to our self-making. The philosopher C. Thi Nguyen, in his fascinating book "Games: Agency as Art" (2020), argues that we have tended to overrate or sentimentalize "pure play" as an ideal while condescending to organized and commodified games as secondary or corrupted forms. He insists that, instead, all games are structured forms of play that teach us, through abstract, stylized example, the ins and outs of agency. In most of life, he points out, we pursue disorderly means toward reasonable goals: we want to get into the right college, or find a perfect life partner, or raise our children well, and we make foolish mistakes before we do. Only in games do we pursue orderly means toward ridiculous goals: touching home plate with your toe is by itself a meaningless purpose, but we learn to do it in ways that are beautifully shaped and orderly and teachable. Watching baseball, we learn cause and effect, strategy and tactics, the uses of delayed gratification, how potent the anticipation of other minds can be. We obsess about games, because they instruct us on how to accomplish things, and on the varieties and strategies of achievement. Certainly, generations of American teenagers, in their torrid fumblings, took to heart the "model of agency" supplied by baseball. James Thurber made a cartoon of this: "And this is Tom Weatherby, an old beau of your mother's. He never got to first base." The segmentation of the game suggested the sequences of seduction.

The constant transmutation of play into games and games back into play is at the heart of our fandom; something that, for the athletes, is done for money—often in pain or without much pleasure—becomes, for the fans, an unstructured escape from responsibility, the thrill that Breslin felt on running away to the stadium. But what is a serious game for the fans—their own fandom—becomes play for the athletes, who, knowing how similar they are to the ones in the other uniform, cannot take most results too solemnly. The fans regard the game as joyfully ridiculous and the players regard the fans as deeply ridiculous, and there's a fluid interchange between the game we see and the play we share.

That's why diehard fans, on the whole, take losing harder than the players do. Pro athletes can often say, "They just played better than we did," or, alternatively, "That's just the way it broke," more serenely than the fans can. When we watch the players congratulate one another after the game and exchange warm words, the social ritual they're enacting is a way of turning a game back into some decent form of play: Hey, we competed, we all did well, see you next year. For that matter, it's when we hear of the players admitting helplessness that we recognize their humanity. The legendary remark of the Yankees' great Mickey Mantle on being once again struck out by the Dodgers' Sandy Koufax—he shrugged and said to the catcher, "How the fuck is anybody supposed to hit that shit?"—suggests just the state of fatalistic acceptance that professors used to admire in Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Stoicism suits center fielders, and princes. People contrast "passive" spectatorship with active play, but there is nothing passive about fandom. The player may be passive in a Zen sense, cultivating a zone of quiet concentration; the fans, on the other hand, have a critical, leaping voice running in their head.

It seems unlikely that any sport will now bind a city together as baseball once did New York. But, then, another version of this bonding is already under way, around the multiplayer video games that form communities—stretching improbably and beautifully across age cohorts—and they do teach agency of a kind. (Those games, indeed, are what Nguyen primarily has in mind.) A century from now, someone will write a book like Baker's about how the cultural broadband of the country, and then the planet, got wound around Assassin's Creed and Halo, whose now stunning graphics will look, in an approaching age of 3-D illusion and tactile immersion, as charmingly period as those photographs of the Polo Grounds seem to us. Play into game and game into play: it's a permanent story. All we can do is tell it again. That eulogy from Runyon about the glory of the Polo Grounds was written right after it was razed by a fire, in 1911, only to be rebuilt and back in business the same year. In the Big Town, as Runyon knew, you can always burn it down, and start over. ♦

THE ART WORLD

SKIN DEEP

The hit-or-miss body art of the Whitney Biennial.

BY JACKSON ARN

"Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle II)," one of Jes Fan's works on display.

JES FAN / COURTESY ANDREW KREPS GALLERY / EMPTY GALLERY

If every label in "Even Better Than the Real Thing," the eighty-first installment of the Whitney Biennial, were peeled off the walls and tossed into the Hudson, what would happen?

Some sections would get more confusing, of course. When you walked through the yellow-lit gallery on the museum's sixth floor, you probably wouldn't suppose that the faint buzz came from a live electrical net floating overhead, let alone that the light, the buzz, and the net might represent "the tension between dissociation and hypervigilance," according to the piece's artist, P. Staff. Passing the cluster of translucent medicine cabinets, you wouldn't know that the buttery stuff inside was Vaseline, and, even if you guessed right, you would still be ignorant of the fact that the artist, Carolyn Lazard, went with Vaseline because it is "both a lubricant and an occlusive ointment," and thus connected to her interest in "the entanglement between illness and capitalism."

But, in other ways, a label-less Biennial might be clearer. The introductory text, by the co-curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli, stresses the point that "Artificial Intelligence is complicating our understanding of what is real." One of the first art works you see on the sixth floor is, sure enough, an A.I.-generated print, courtesy of Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, so it's a letdown to continue through the galleries and find approximately zero other pieces dealing with artificial intelligence. A show purged of wall text wouldn't tease you like that, at least. You would also have an easier time recognizing how many of these works depend on text not just for background but for aesthetics: whatever beauty or humor they've got comes from nearby words, as the glow of the moon comes from the glare of the sun.

Is this worth getting grumpy about? You can always scold the Whitney Biennial, the longest-running survey of American art, for not being better—but, then, you can always scold winter for being cold and gray. Some inevitable combination of bureaucracy, human fallibility, and mathematical law keeps things bland: each time, the curators settle on sixty or a hundred or, this year, seventy-one artists whose creations have some relevance to the state of society, as well as to the state of art. Doing that job and *not* ending up with yawny work would be like rolling double sixes seventy-one times in a row. This year, as ever, eclecticism is mistaken for richness: "Even Better Than the Real Thing" makes a well-publicized push for geographic diversity, but its most important lesson might be that twenty-first-century art can come from anywhere and still speak in the same jet-lagged monotone. More than a quarter of the artists on display, by the way, went to one of three schools.

Assuming that a sample like this can be taken seriously, the most exciting subject for contemporary American artists isn't artificial intelligence; it's the good old human body. Striking and bland art works alike have a fleshy funk. Jes Fan converts CT scans of his body into dun fibreglass sculptures. In Julia Phillips's ceramic sculptures, the casts hint at a phantom chest and face; a gallery over, Carmen Winant, mooching off the pathos of the abortion clinic, combines hundreds of photographs of physicians and volunteers into a giant rectangle. Better than all three is Pippa Garner, who, in her eighties, has been entrusted with the museum's third floor and earns her keep with drawings, reprised here as photocopies, of useless body-augmenting gadgets: a phone holder that allows you to text with your

tongue, a "multi-pen" for signing checks, a remote-control toilet flusher. Spend enough time snorting at these and the body itself starts to seem like another clumsy gadget—tongue-texting may be ridiculous, but so is a *tongue*. Nothing in these nervous scribbles feels final; Garner, like nature, is always just spitballing. Which means that what is earnest and thoughtful about her drawings, many of them produced during her gender transition, is inseparable from what's funny. Good artists, like good comedians, do just fine without the safety net of explication.

Look through old catalogues of this show and you will find, amid hundreds of forgotten names, Joseph Cornell, Nam June Paik, Jackson Pollock, Nicole Eisenman, Kerry James Marshall, and Julie Mehretu. Whether or not any of this year's batch belong on that list, they've contributed enough splashes of wit and visual delight to keep "Even Better Than the Real Thing" from feeling like a total desert. A silver medal for body comedy goes to Sharon Hayes, whose video piece "Ricerche: four" assembles interviews with elderly L.G.B.T.Q.I.A. Americans about sex and sexuality, in the manner of Pasolini's "Love Meetings." Slow going at first, it generates a startling amount of warmth as its subjects confess and blush and chuckle. "I still think I'm sexy, and I feel sexy," a man in a peach-colored ball cap says, while a chicken scampers behind him. A relaxed, front-porch sort of charm holds the piece together, but at some point you realize that you're facing maybe half a millennium's worth of combined experience with love. The same laid-back monumentality can be felt in Suzanne Jackson's acrylic-gel paintings (sculptures, almost), which look like jagged panels of glass that absorb everything they touch. The best ones hang, frameless, in the middle of their room, inviting audiences to inspect them from every angle and ogle the seeds and other odd morsels trapped inside. Think of it as Action painting's evil twin: creation as slow, oozy accumulation.

Other worthwhile pieces aren't body-related in the slightest, and more power to them. Takako Yamaguchi's abstracted seascapes don't reinvent the wheel, but they're too lush for anyone but the ghost of Clement Greenberg to mind, with a sleekness that smacks of mid-century graphic design. In Nikita Gale's "Stolen Time," an old player piano produces no melody, just the tuneless plonks of keys moving down and up. It's a heftier version of "4'33"," running where John Cage crawled: the sounds of the keys aren't music as the word is usually understood, but no pianist could use her instrument without making sounds like these, too. When we talk about music, we tend to mean either a score or a physical performance, but we're probably referring to a little of both, with Gale's enhanced sounds being the missing link between them. I can imagine her work giving a copyright attorney an aneurysm: Do its noises constitute a bass line or a melody? Why does the legal system make these kinds of distinctions in the first place? Whose intellectual property are we dealing with? The questions come to you unbidden, no thanks to the prodding of the label—"Stolen Time" might be even stronger without one, actually. Ideas follow from other ideas with the satisfying click of a mathematical proof. I've said it before: conceptual art isn't tedious; bad conceptual art is.

By a close margin, the four fabric assemblages of Harmony Hammond are the fleshiest things in this show. They use a variety of materials to suggest a whole menagerie of bodies, from pimply-shiny to aged and chalky. Colors are subdued for the most part, and strategically so: when a touch of red shrieks out of the dirty white field of "Chenille #11," it almost hurts. Hammond has suggested that flourishes like this were meant to evoke "sexual brutality against women," but take a few steps back and marvel at how this only deepens her work's mystery—if the red is brutality, what are the string, the smeared white, the grommets? Interpretation is interwoven with the sheer, thingy strangeness of the object, and can't be ripped out. Art like that is built to last, I would guess. But if you prefer your political messaging neat, no chaser, you are welcome to walk to the other end of the sixth floor, go to the terrace, and spend some quality time with Kiyan Williams's big dirt sculpture of the White House sinking into the ground, complete with upside-down American flag. There's a label in case you can't figure out what it means. ♦

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MUSICAL EVENTS

TWIN FEATS

The Escher Quartet's Bartók marathon; Igor Levit's symphonic piano recital.

BY ALEX ROSS

On March 28, 1949, at Times Hall, in midtown Manhattan, an unexpectedly large crowd materialized to hear the Juilliard Quartet play the second part of a two-concert survey of the six string quartets of Béla Bartók. According to the *Times*, so many seats were crammed onstage that the quartet "had just enough elbow room, and no more, for its performance." Mounted police monitored a crush of ticket seekers outside. The musical intelligentsia had turned out en masse. In attendance was the serialist composer Milton Babbitt, who, in a commentary on the event, hailed Bartók's cycle as a "single, self-contained creative act." Also present was Dmitri Shostakovich, who had come to New York at Stalin's behest, in order to mouth propaganda at the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace. Shostakovich, too, listened alertly; he had embarked on his own monumental quartet project. All told, the concert attested to Bartók's ascension, four years after his death, to the classical pantheon. Formerly, composers of quartets had reckoned with the gigantic shadow of Beethoven. Now they also had to contend with a leaner, feistier ghost.

Bartók, like Igor Stravinsky and Alban Berg, had the fortune to be a popular modernist, appealing to a broad audience while keeping his place in the twentieth-century vanguard. His quartets exhibit an extraordinary degree of motivic coherence, their structures often extrapolated from a core motto of five or six notes. The string writing is at once violently inventive and acutely expressive, incorporating guttural distortions of pitch, cawing glissandos, clattering bowing effects, and the "Bartók pizzicato," in which a string is plucked so hard that it snaps against the fingerboard. The middle quartets, created amid the avant-garde furor of the nineteen-twenties, border on raw noise. Yet the composer's passionate devotion to the folk traditions of his native Hungary and of neighboring countries meant that he could never entirely abandon the home ground of tonality. The result was a music as uncannily familiar as it was radically new.

Bartók's string writing is at once violently inventive and acutely expressive.

No equine units were needed outside Alice Tully Hall the other day when the Escher Quartet—Adam Barnett-Hart, Brendan Speltz, Pierre Lapointe, and Brook Speltz—played the Bartók quartets in a single, three-and-a-half-hour concert, under the aegis of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Still, it felt like a significant occasion. The Eschers, who have been playing together since 2005, when they met at the Manhattan School of Music, were nodding to another august group, the Emerson Quartet, which disbanded last fall after a remarkable forty-seven-year run. No one seems to have attempted a Bartók-quartet marathon until the Emersons undertook one, at Tully, in 1981; they repeated the feat seven times in the course of the following two decades. The Eschers were mentored by the Emersons and often emulate their elders. The emphasis is on technical perfection, formal cogency, and unity of interpretive approach. Underscoring the continuity is the fact that David Finckel, the Emersons' longtime cellist, is a co-artistic director of the Chamber Music Society.

In the first two quartets—the concert proceeded chronologically, with two intermissions—the Eschers were restrained in their approach, missing opportunities to dramatize the folkish component of Bartók's writing. I couldn't shake the memory of a blistering all-Bartók program that the Takács Quartet offered in December at the Clark Library, in Los Angeles. Consider the middle movement of the Second Quartet. At the Clark, Edward Dusinberre, the Takácses' longtime

ILLUSTRATION BY ZHENYA OLIINYK

first violinist, dug into the main tune with village-fiddler zest while Harumi Rhodes, the second violinist, sawed away savagely at octave D's, and Richard O'Neill, the violist, struck pizzicatos that went off like firecrackers. The Eschers lacked raucous energy in this passage and in several comparable ones.

I had the sense, though, that the Eschers were husbanding their resources. (The Takács concert was limited to the even-numbered quartets.) Indeed, in the Third Quartet things heated up handsomely: the coda built to a lusty frenzy, even as the musicians maintained near-miraculous control of pitch and coördination of rhythm. The stage was set for the Fourth, whose five movements add up to a summa of Bartók's art, by turns tenaciously labored, sinuously swirling, nocturnally eerie, pizzicato-punchy, and flat-out wild. I became increasingly appreciative of this quartet's unerring balance of voices: in the time-stopping middle movement, each player is given an extended solo, like storytellers taking turns around a campfire, and here the eloquence was unbroken.

In the Fifth and Sixth Quartets, the Eschers threw caution aside. This was crucial in summoning the eclectic, mercurial personality of Bartók's farewell essays in the medium. The Burletta of the Sixth is an exercise in inebriated tomfoolery, with intimations of café jazz; the Adagio molto of the Fifth, by contrast, is a rapt midnight colloquy, akin to Beethoven's most visionary slow movements. The Eschers tied together this kaleidoscopic music with spirited authority. In all, they seem poised to carry forward the standard of flexible mastery that the Emersons exemplified for decades; their discography shows a sensitive command of repertory ranging from Mendelssohn and Dvořák to Zemlinsky and Ives. If they still have something to learn from the Takácses' refined rowdiness, the same can be said of every quartet working.

Three days before the Eschers occupied Tully, a no less striking marathon took place at Carnegie Hall. The thirty-seven-year-old German pianist Igor Levit has pulled off many memorable exploits in his career—performances of Beethoven's final sonatas and of Shostakovich's Preludes and Fugues in single sittings; a rendition of the Goldberg Variations in the midst of a Marina Abramović installation; a twenty-hour-long immersion in Satie's endlessly repeating "Vexations." But the program he brought to Carnegie may have been his most audacious to date. It consisted of Hindemith's Suite "1922"; the first movement of Mahler's Tenth Symphony, transcribed for piano by Ronald Stevenson; and Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, transcribed for piano by Liszt.

To devote most of a piano recital to music written for orchestra appears self-defeating. No matter how brilliant the playing, the audience is all too likely to be noticing what's absent: the variety of instrumental timbres, the enveloping crunch of the tutti. Yet the piano possesses its own occult powers, and both transcribers cannily deploy its resources. In the climax of the Mahler, crashing tremolando chords over a long pedal approximate the shattered cathedral majesty of the original. During the central crisis of Beethoven's Funeral March, hammering octaves in the bass register, again with the pedal held down, unleash a dissonant boom that is in some ways more unnerving than the corresponding passage in orchestral form.

Extreme virtuosity is required to play the "Eroica" transcription, and Levit supplied it. The rapid-fire sotto-voce chords that launch the Scherzo went off with purring finesse; the coda of the first movement became an exuberant one-man stampede. Just as impressive was Levit's ability to sustain tension across spare textures, as at the desolate end of the Funeral March. Acoustical mirages beguiled the ears: in the trio of the Scherzo, brassy E-flat-major triads evoked a trio of hunting horns. Most of all, Levit demonstrated a comprehensive, from-the-gut understanding of a work that even the most gifted conductors struggle to grasp whole. You felt that you were listening not to a symphony in reduced form but to the greatest of all Beethoven sonatas. Much of this illusion resulted from Liszt's sorcery in translating the score for the piano; the rest was Levit's doing.

A hushed E-flat-major encore, in the form of Brahms's Intermezzo Opus 117, No. 1, brought the recital into the zone of the transcendent. "My God," a colleague texted afterward. If you missed it, Levit is coming around next season with the Beethoven Seventh. ♦

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THE THEATRE

TRUTH OR DARE

A new production of Henrik Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

Jeremy Strong plays a scientist whose pleas echo today's climate warnings.

I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself for missing the Thursday, March 14th, preview performance of Henrik Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People," published in 1882 and revived at Circle in the Square, in a new version by Amy Herzog, under Sam Gold's deceptively simple direction. At the climax of the play, there's a town meeting in a raucous bar, the whole place fit to explode with civic tension and proto-Fascist violence. The theatre lights are up, as if to indicate that the audience is also attending the meeting, and Jeremy Strong, playing Dr. Thomas Stockmann, a scientist armed with the truth but lonely in its defense, is standing atop the bar, trying to get his point across.

At that moment of high drama, one environmental protester in the audience after another got to their feet and began to fulminate about the climate. "I am very, very sorry to interrupt your night and this amazing performance!" one shouted. "The oceans are acidifying! The oceans are rising and will swallow this city and this entire theatre whole!" The protest action, with its references to science and to government inertia, and with its tightrope walking along the boundaries of free speech, perfectly matched the tone and the content of the play. Many people in attendance thought (wrongly) that it was a contemporizing gag—a possibly corny play at relevance—planned by Gold. The truth can be an off-putting distraction. It changes trajectories; slows down the blithe, fleet motion of progress; makes your big night out at the theatre a weird and confusing ordeal.

Thomas Stockmann is a proud, sad, bombastic, socially clumsy, utterly sincere doctor working as the medical director of the baths in a cloistered Norwegian town in the late nineteenth century. He's a widower who has become passionate about doing what's right. His brother Peter (Michael Imperioli) is the mayor—and therefore, quite awkwardly, his domineering boss. Thomas likes to host young people at his house, though he has his daughter, Petra (Victoria Pedretti), do the real work of hosting: she serves food, pours drinks, entertains the retinue of journalists, seafarers, and political wannabes who are constantly stopping by. Thomas sits off to the side and admires their energy and righteous countercultural beliefs. He's excited for the future, when they'll take over.

The recently opened baths, Thomas's remit, promise to be an important source of revenue for the town. Sick people from all over will come to convalesce and rest up. It's inconvenient, then, perhaps catastrophically so, when Thomas reveals a finding that he's been working toward in secret: the baths use water that has been contaminated by the local tanneries. It's full of bacteria. (His father-in-law, first funny then menacing, calls the bacteria "invisible animals.") After Thomas offers his report to Peter and makes a series of suggestions to right this potentially fatal wrong, a veil lifts, and Peter's identity as, above all, a political operator, becomes evident:

> PETER: This morning I stopped by to speak with the town engineer. I brought up your proposals, sort of "by the way," as something we might consider down the line—
>
> THOMAS: Down the line!
>
> PETER: He was very amused by the impracticality of my idea. Tell me, Thomas—have you thought about how much what you're proposing would cost? According to the engineer, it would be on the order of three, four hundred thousand crowns. Maybe more.
>
> THOMAS: That much.
>
> PETER: Yes. "That much." And the work would take at least two years.
>
> THOMAS: I'm sorry to hear that.
>
> PETER: So what would we do with the Baths in the meantime? I guess we'd close them. We'd have to. Unless you think the customers will still show up this summer once the rumor gets out that the water is a health risk.

This bit of climactic dialogue, ham-

ILLUSTRATION BY WESLEY ALLSBROOK

mered into plain yet insinuating and increasingly dangerous English by Herzog, is emblematic of this new production. Ibsen is a locus of particular interest for Herzog: her transfiguration of "A Doll's House" last year, starring Jessica Chastain, took a similar tack. She finds the word-by-word humor in Ibsen and throws it like a huge, falsely comforting blanket over the social trouble that the plays describe. In her argot, Ibsen's characters sound like slow-talking, fast-thinking products of migration across the U.S.—people with country manners and city coolness lurking within. Listening to her translations is like riding in a placid yacht over shark-infested waters.

Herzog's take on Ibsen reminds me of Tomas Tranströmer's gently troubling poems, as translated, from the Swedish, by Patty Crane. From "After Someone's Death":

> You can still shuffle along on skis in the winter sun
> through groves where last year's leaves hang on.
> Like pages torn from old telephone books—all of the names swallowed up by the cold.

In "Enemy," a slow dread, first muffled but gradually made all too clear, is prompted by the organism of the town as a whole, fickle public, whose whims reveal another kind of invisible animal—discernible only by the steady changing of the collective mood. Peter is opposed to Thomas's proposals from the start, but at the outset Thomas is supported by Hovstad, the dynamic publisher of a liberal paper (played in sharp, ironic, and deadly accurate style by Caleb Eberhardt). Hovstad, one of the young people who often gather at the Stockmanns' house, has published several of Thomas's ardent articles and seems to respect the older man. The paper's printer, Aslaksen (the always excellent and here magnificently funny Thomas Jay Ryan), is a cautious moderate who promises to corral the working class and bring them over to Thomas's side. But in the course of the play, for reasons both deeply personal and politically expedient, each man becomes an impediment to justice.

It was a masterstroke to cast Jeremy Strong in the role of Thomas Stockmann. He's a patient, nuanced performer with an instinct for the rhythms of everyday talk. He and Herzog both find conversational menace like certain musicians sniff out a perfect pitch. He speaks at a measured pace but with constant urgency, almost a strain, even when Thomas is at his happiest, giving toasts and mingling with the people he thinks are his friends. His tenor has currents of impatient energy running under it. His declarative sentences turn upward at the end, like a series of unanswerable questions.

Strong's public persona—as a dead-serious, process-obsessed actor (as portrayed in a Profile in this magazine), never hesitant to be an inconvenience if true art hangs in the balance—is at work here, too. Not unlike the sad clown Kendall Roy, from "Succession," the character with whom Strong is most likely to be forever identified, Thomas makes grand attempts at rhetoric that don't quite succeed, perhaps, paradoxically, because they are so earnest and deeply felt.

At the big moment when—stymied by the multiheaded hydra of the government and the press—Thomas tries to read his findings aloud, he does so in an increasingly tragicomic mode. Defending his own expertise, he makes a bizarre dog analogy: "There's a difference between a stray and a poodle, isn't there? There's a fundamental difference. I'm not saying those mutts wouldn't be capable of learning good behavior if they'd had the right opportunities, but I wouldn't want one living in my house. . . . But somehow when it comes to humans—when I say I have studied biology, I know things you do not know, you should listen to me, that—that you can't abide."

It's a perfect echo of the righteous but—let's face it—heretofore largely ineffective pleas of climate scientists, whose cries from the heart have become the droning background to our march toward disaster. I sat in the theatre, the day after the protest, hoping that the activists would strike again, make one more nice, big mess.

When the protesters had marched toward the stage, causing barely comprehended chaos, both Imperioli and Ryan had initially stayed in character as they attempted to fend them off. Strong, though, authentic impulses all the way down, reacted as Thomas, on the protesters' side. "Let him speak!" he implored. I'm certain he meant it. Thomas surely would have. ♦

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"Road House."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

Imagine that you're a bouncer in a scuzzy small-town bar where some of the world's nastiest drunks go at one another with fists, knives, and broken beer bottles—and that's on a good night. Forced to risk life and limb intervening in non-stop flareups of physical violence, what do you do? A better question: What would Patrick Swayze do?

Jake Gyllenhaal stars in Doug Liman's remake of the 1989 film.

The movie is "Road House," a critically mauled, cult-reclaimed smash-'em-up from 1989, and Swayze, as Dalton, the bar's newly hired cooler, offers a handy crash course in the art of de-escalation. "One, never underestimate your opponent. Expect the unexpected," he says. "Two, take it outside. Never start anything inside the bar unless it's absolutely necessary. And, three, be nice."

Sound advice, and, until the time comes for him to rip out an assailant's throat, Dalton heeds it scrupulously. He minds his manners, underestimates (almost) no one, and takes to the outdoors like a Zen monk, his oil-slicked torso catching the sunlight just so during Tai Chi practice. But not every Swayze character is oily in such a desirable way. In the eerie Reaganite suburbia of "Donnie Darko" (2001), an even darker vision of the nineteen-eighties, we find Swayze as Jim Cunningham, a smooth motivational speaker with a bad case of soul rot. In lieu of self-defense tips, he offers useless self-help platitudes: "Son, violence is a product of fear. Learn to truly love yourself." No wonder it's so satisfying when the troubled young Donnie Darko (Jake Gyllenhaal) steps up to the mike and lets this charlatan have it: "I think you're the fucking Antichrist."

The confrontation is over almost before it begins, but watching it again recently I couldn't help imagining what would have happened if the two had come to blows. In a bout between Donnie Darko and Dirty Dancer, who would win? Swayze had already moved on from the action-movie glories of "Road House" and "Point Break" (1991), but could he have prevailed based on his golden-god physicality alone? Or would the young Gyllenhaal have revealed, beneath the baby fat and the gawky smile, some of the vengeful fighting spirit he would later display in the frenzied boxing drama "Southpaw" (2015)?

The energetic but dim remake of "Road House," directed by Doug Liman, is hardly the picture to settle the question, much less inspire any new ones. The movie passes from memory as quickly as it passes on the screen. But there's a poignancy to the sight of Gyllenhaal, now forty-three and shredded to the max, paying tribute to his late former screen partner. Gyllenhaal's Dalton isn't a bouncer by trade. He had been an Ultimate Fighting Championship star until he snapped and pummelled an opponent to a pulp—a career-ending trauma that still haunts his dreams. Now he lives out of his car and is trying to earn money by signing up for freelance fights. But even the toughest opponents (including one played by Austin Post, a.k.a. the rapper Post Malone) tend to forfeit in fear.

It's at one of these aborted fights that Dalton catches the attention of Frankie (Jessica Williams), who offers him a job cooling the riffraff at her roadhouse down in the Florida Keys. After briefly weighing his options, including suicide, Dalton accepts. But why? Does he want to visit Ernest Hemingway's house or check out the bridge that got blown up in "True Lies" (1994)? Maybe he realizes that he still has some fight in him; then again, maybe he thinks his death wish might yet be granted. In any case, Gyllenhaal is a skilled enough actor to keep you guessing. His earnest Eagle Scout grin has always possessed an animating touch of madness; you'll even find traces of it in his good-guy roles, in "Zodiac" (2007) and "Prisoners" (2013), where his characters' dogged pursuit of justice tilts a bit too easily into obsession. A little of this ferocity goes a long way: witness his most flamboyantly creepy turn, in the unhinged media satire "Nightcrawler" (2014). Here, his undercurrent of menace works nicely; it's just the thing to throw an otherwise formulaic affair pleasurably off balance. In that respect, "Road House" is very much in his wheelhouse.

The first "Road House" was directed by Rowdy Herrington, presumably because Stompy McFisticuffs was unavailable. Released theatrically in May, 1989, the movie got a bit lost

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

during a summer that brought us "Batman," "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade," "Lethal Weapon 2," "Ghostbusters II," "The Abyss," and "Licence to Kill." Fire "Road House" up again thirty-five years later, though, and an exploding jukebox of trashy delights awaits, along with a jolting reminder of what Hollywood action movies used to look like. The flesh comes in two forms, seductively photographed and viciously pulverized. The idiot plot is delivered with an impressively straight face: night after night, brawl after brawl, the bar becomes ground zero in a battle for a small town's soul. On one side are a scheming tycoon and his team of regulation plug-uglies. On the other side are Dalton, his bouncers, a sexy doctor, a few salt-of-the-earth grunts, and a drawling Sam Elliott, who proves Dalton's equal—and maybe even his superior—in pin-up-worthy pulchritude.

The remake's writers, Anthony Bagarozzi and Charles Mondry, stick to the first film's narrative blueprint, as if to signal a return to B-movie basics. The hope is that you'll chuckle more in recognition than in derision when a doctor (Daniela Melchior) provides Dalton with more than strictly medical attention, or when the movie's highly swattable rich-boy villain (Billy Magnussen) swans around on a yacht. A far more formidable figure is the hit man Knox, an aptly named fortress of a fellow who, as played by the professional fighter Conor McGregor, crashes through the proceedings like an Irish-accented wrecking ball. McGregor's flamboyant line readings may be as painful to endure as his punches, but he has wild-eyed energy to burn, and he gets a hell of an entrance, striding through an open marketplace with nary a stitch of clothing or a hint of shame. It's a good sight gag, even as it reveals a certain timidity in the movie: it's telling that the one instance of nudity is played not for titillation but for laughs.

Everyone else stays mostly covered, frequent shots of Gyllenhaal's slashed and battered torso notwithstanding. "Road House" itself often feels hemmed in, awkwardly suspended between modern-day genre outing and unironic eighties-movie homage. The writers have understandably discarded some of the original's less palatable lines ("I used to fuck guys like you in prison!"), and they've added a little snap to the material, mainly courtesy of a hungry crocodile. Less successfully, they've coated dialogue in a hip sheen of self-awareness: hence the friendly bookstore worker (Hannah Lanier) who likens Dalton, rather wishfully, to a character in a Western. Which Western, exactly? "The Man Who Plowed His 4x4 Into Liberty Valance"?

In an unsurprising concession to our era of instant gratification, Gyllenhaal's Dalton begins hurting people a lot sooner than his predecessor did. He does still endeavor to be nice, though, and it's amusing when he brings a group of troublemakers outside, teaches them all a well-earned lesson, and then drives them to the hospital. They're lucky, at least for now. Yet to come are wounds that no doctor can treat, some of them inflicted by boats and others by bombs. (Both "Road House" movies bear the stamp of the veteran producer Joel Silver, for whom fiery explosions are a gratifying must.) You can see why the violence, toggling between intimate, close-quarters stabbery and Looney Tunes-level absurdism, must have appealed to Liman, who's proved a smart, versatile action director, in films as different as "The Bourne Identity" (2002) and "Edge of Tomorrow" (2014). He wisely shoots the bar brawls in mostly long, uninterrupted takes, moving the camera in synch with the actors and cutting more for clarity than sensation. But such continuity of movement has a way of spoiling its own illusion, exposing digital seams and artificial thwacks that have clearly been applied in post-production.

It may be that the uncanny-valley flaws are more glaringly apparent on the big screen. If so, most viewers will never see them, owing to some behind-the-scenes butting of heads that's nearly as outlandish as the melees onscreen. It's a measure of the new Hollywood economy that, despite having premièred earlier this month to a raucous and appreciative audience at the SXSW film festival, "Road House" is bypassing theatres entirely and beaming directly into your Amazon Prime Video queue. Liman has protested the decision, and it's hard not to empathize. "Road House" is far from a great movie, but what pleasures it generates, novel or nostalgic, muscular or meagre, are surely best experienced—and possibly even magnified—in the company of a crowd. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mick Stevens, must be received by Sunday, March 31st. The finalists in the March 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 15th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

“ ”

THE FINALISTS

“You say ‘flood’ like it’s a bad thing.”
Doug Haslam, Newton, Mass.

“Which list are we on, guest or menu?”
Patricia Lane Conrad, Penn Yan, N.Y.

“We’ll just meet you there.”
Barb Jump, Center Cross, Va.

THE WINNING CAPTION

“Your wish may be granted within three to five business days.”
Colin Beasor, Albany, N.Y.

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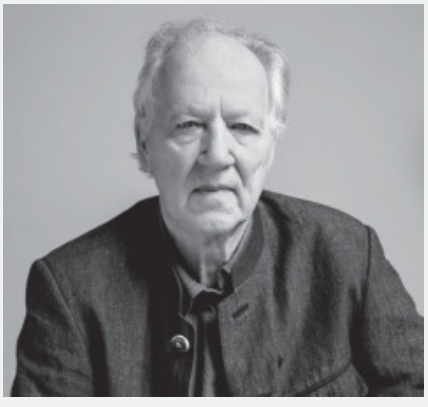

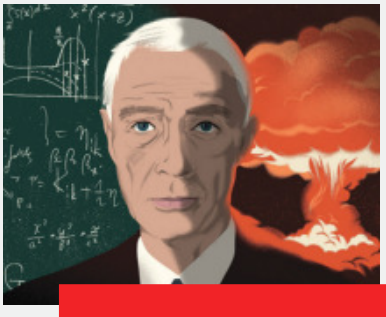

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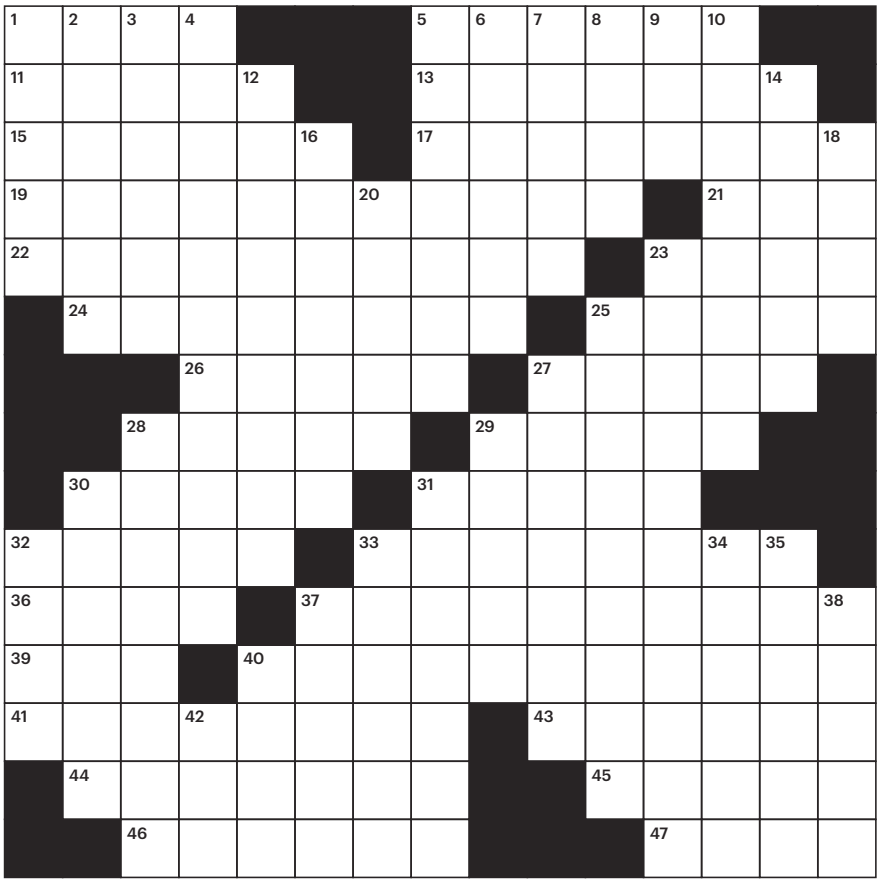
THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY PAOLO PASCO



ACROSS

1 Good-for-something action?

5 "Happy Days" character who got his nickname from his childhood affinity for crafting with clay

11 Raja and Hatha, e.g.

13 Forth

15 Four-wheeled rentals

17 Tracks that are off the beaten path

19 International cricket contests

21 Certain Studio Ghibli collectible

22 Rolls on a conveyor belt?

23 NATO letter between Oscar and Quebec

24 Tin coating?

25 Eccentric

26 Engage in fanfaronade

27 "Star Wars" droid, familiarly

28 Downs quickly

29 What one may do up and down

30 List in an etiquette guide

31 Portrayer of Watson in the two-thousands

32 "Can't Fight the Moonlight" singer Rimes

33 Installment in a YouTube series, perhaps

36 Affected, in a way

37 Director of the 2023 film "Past Lives"

39 Person with the other half of a heart necklace, maybe

40 Moves made for a potential partner

41 Docking stations?

43 Title in the title of Brunei's national anthem

44 Bead

45 Parent company of Stroh's

46 They're not given to giving

47 Buddha's belly?

DOWN

1 Methods: Abbr.

2 Came out of time out?

3 Athlete who boycotted Wimbledon from 1988 to 1990

4 Classic children's book with touchable "fur"

5 Download before a flight, maybe

6 Like some near-perfect games

7 Many a "Lord of the Flies" character

8 Leaves drained

9 Online-messaging system that predates AIM

10 Class party?

12 Look-alike of a Greek question mark

14 Challenge

16 Ancient Persian governors

18 Off on a quest?

20 Tie up in the kitchen

23 Staple of some cookouts

25 Well suited, say?

27 Big hangovers?

28 Where one may care for kids

29 Act as a replacement (for)

30 Gaming term for "weakened" that references a toy brand

31 Removes from an exchange

32 R. & D. sites

33 Comparative adjective in "Under the Sea"

34 Consoling response to "I'm sorry"

35 Surround

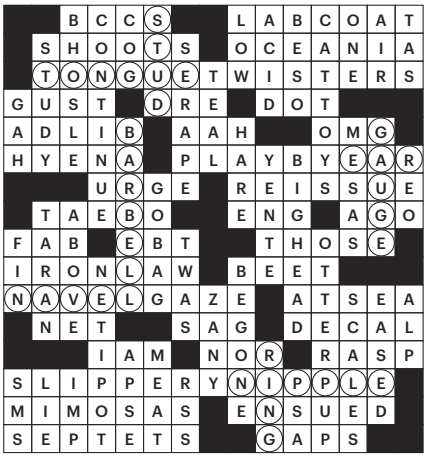
37 Eric who wrote "The Very Lonely Firefly"

38 Fellas

40 Ones whose heads touch the ground

42 Staple of some cookouts

Solution to the previous puzzle:



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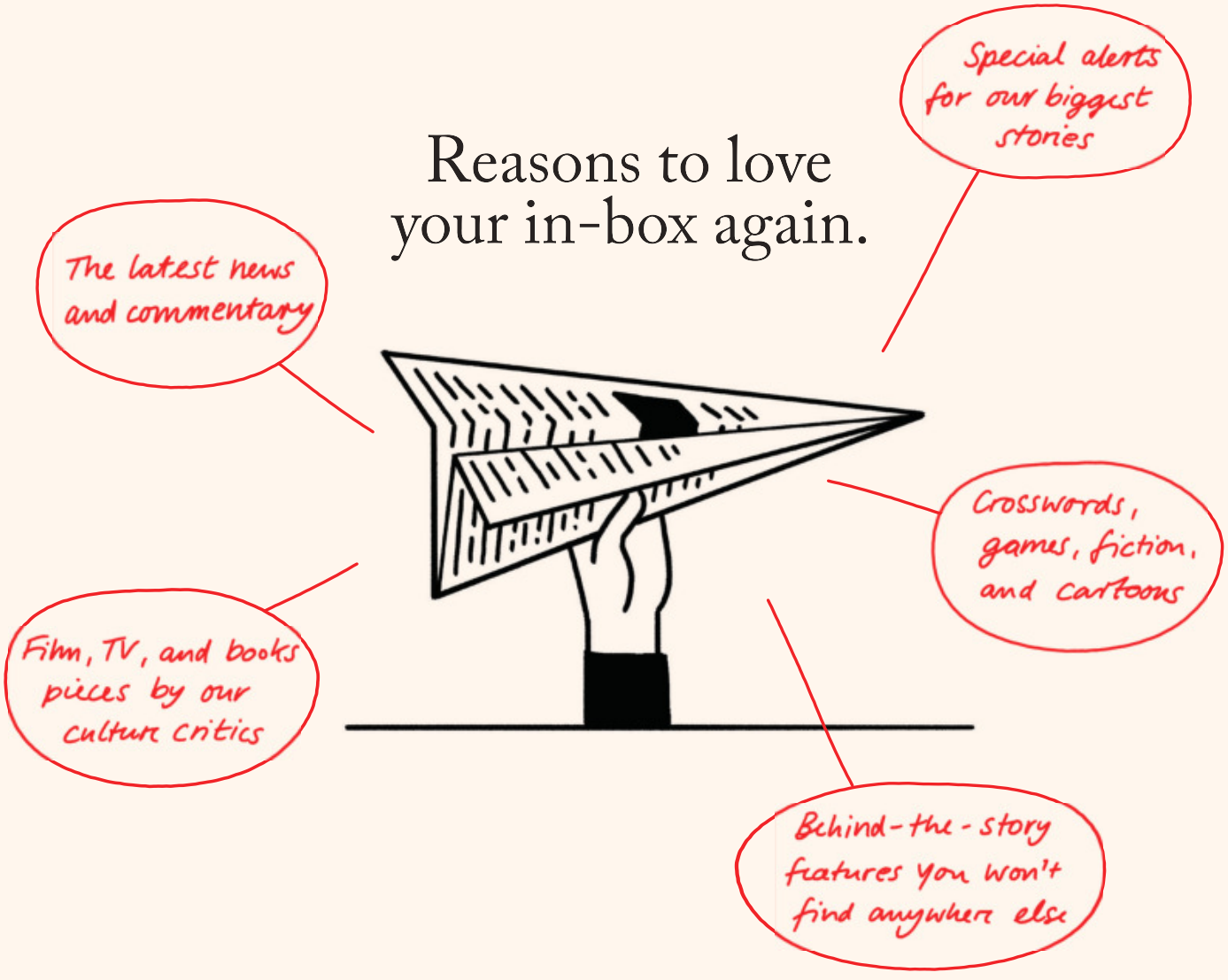
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